

## inevitable everything

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# inevitable everything

by [isabilightwood](#)

## Summary

The Yiling Laozu demands Lan Wangji's hand in marriage in exchange for his aid in the failing Sunshot Campaign. Or so it seems.

Three months earlier, Lan Wangji is rescued from the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave by a handsome man with a brilliant smile who wields a power he always believed corrupting and uncontrollable as easily as breathing.

## Notes

This was of course inspired by the many wonderful Yiling Laozu fics in this fandom, with a twist or two. It's been yelling at me to be written since last summer, but I wouldn't let myself start until I finished my last long fic. So here, finally, is the beginning!

Title from:

"What would happen if someone played their existence not only to its inevitable end, but also to its inevitable beginning? What if someone played their music to its inevitable everything?"  
- Ryka Aoki, Light From Uncommon Stars

The quote seemed fitting, but there are no violinists making faustian bargains or space aliens with donut shops in this fic

**CW:** JGS-typical language re: sex workers

# Chapter 1

## Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

Sunshine did not belong in a war camp. War ought to be conducted under shadowed skies or pouring rain, leaving every survivor coated in layers of grime. Sun let in hope, and the Sunshot Campaign had none left.

The cloudless sky was greeted with suspicion on the day the Yiling Laozu appeared in the center of camp. Suspicion, and then fear, as roiling darkness gathered in the clearing before the command tent. Despite their weariness, disciples from every sect raced to confront the threat at their heart, only to halt in confusion. For this darkness was unlike any they had ever seen.

Ever changing in size and shape, cresting and falling like a stormy sea, the darkness was so absolute it convinced the eyes of a bluish glow. No monster or imp, ghost or demon produced an energy quite like this, and none among them could guess how to combat it.

Zewu-jun emerged from the tent, and raised Liebing to his lips. Yet even as the first few notes left his xiao, the darkness began to disperse as though it had never been. Chifeng-zun, at his shoulder, hefted Baxia into a ready position.

Five figures were left standing in its place. Zewu-jun took note of only one before he was running, paying no heed to propriety as he rushed for his brother, long missing and thought dead.

A man in black and red robes, patterned with swirling silver and designed to emphasize his height and the breadth of his shoulders stepped into his path, twirling a dizi between his fingers, a sword nowhere in sight. This could be only one man.

The Yiling Laozu did not flinch when the point of Zewu-jun's sword came to rest in the hollow of his throat.

After all, why should he? If the rumors were true, no mortal weapon could kill him. The rumors varied — he was immortal, he was already dead, he was a king of demons. He was a savior, a villain, a conqueror. But on that one thing, they all agreed.

A disturbance in the Burial Mounds had been reported ten years earlier. Disturbances were common in the Burial Mounds. Fierce corpses were the most common — ordinary, aimless without a demonic cultivator to control them, and avoidable in small numbers. The people of Yiling were well versed in trapping them for cultivators to deal with.

Yet every so often, perhaps once in a 12-year zodiac cycle, a monster more grotesque than the worst imagination could conjure emerged. Mindless things that rampaged directionless across the countryside until cultivators tracked them down.

Since the disappearance of his closest friends while night hunting in Yiling, the then-leader of Yunmeng Jiang had taken a personal interest in the dreary and downtrodden town. He took a group of disciples to investigate, and found nothing. Nothing, save a strange force that turned him away at the base of the Burial Mounds, well beyond the usual point of no return. He returned to Lotus Pier, perplexed and empty handed.

Bright lights were seen emanating from the Burial Mounds day and night, a constellation of brilliant colors that made even the weary citizens of Yiling put down their baskets and stare. Sect Leader Jiang returned, and left again.

The colors vanished, and returned, and stopped altogether.

Life went on.

Until the magistrate of Yiling refused to pay tribute to Yunmeng five years later.

Sect Leader Jiang arrived to find the town painted red — literally. Every house and shop had a fresh coat of paint, and a shrine had been constructed at the base of the mounds to a being the magistrate insisted Yiling now owed its allegiance.

A being, for the people of Yiling could or would not say if their Laozu was human, god, or demon — and they did not care.

They also did not care that fierce corpses wandered the streets of Yiling under their own power, and when Sect Leader Jiang attempted to persuade them, he found himself ushered unceremoniously out of town.

There was no longer poison in the air. The soil regained its spring, and crop yield increased. Streams contained entire schools of fish, cows produced more milk, chickens more eggs. The town carpenter was suddenly inspired to carve detailed patterns into every piece of furniture he constructed. The pall that had hung over Yiling since before the eldest grandmother's grandmother was conceived was finally lifted.

The Yiling Laozu had tamed the Burial Mounds, and it did not matter to the ordinary people of Yiling what demonic powers he called on to accomplish it.

If Yiling had a demon to thank for its good fortune, the people would deal with the dead walking among them.

Cultivators knew better. The Yiling Laozu's power would turn on him eventually, as it had on Xue Chonghai before him. The sects sent out disciples in the hopes of learning his weaknesses.

Yet no matter how many disciples were dispatched to Yiling for answers, none were forthcoming. Every rumor brought back to the sects was more outrageous than the last.

Three details were consistent: the Yiling Laozu carried a dizi like a sword, wore a red ribbon in his hair, and conversed with the dead.

Under ordinary circumstances, the sects would have marched on him immediately. But the Yiling Laozu seemed to have no interest in expansion, and he was not the only demonic cultivator messing with forces beyond mortal control.

Qishan Wen cast its fires eastward, and the loss of a single town could no longer concern Yunmeng Jiang.

Even as cultivators clashed with corpses on the battlefield, only to find themselves forced to cut down fallen friends, the Yiling Laozu had not stirred himself to join either side.

Until now.

The Yiling Laozu stared at Zewu-jun down the length of his sword, a threat and a dare in his lack of reaction. The only sound was the rustling of the tents in the breeze.

Until finally, Hanguang-jun said something short and succinct to the Yiling Laozu. He stepped aside with a feline grace, casually flicking the sword with his dizi when he was already out of range.

Zewu-jun blinked, dazed as though waking from a long sleep, as his brother stepped forward to bow. He reached out with a shaking hand until his fingers brushed his brother's cheek. He gave a ragged sob and clutched his brother close.

The flap of the command tent opened a second time, and out stepped the nominal leader of the Sunshot Campaign, though Chifeng-zun was the defacto executor of all practical matters. Jin Guangshan stopped in the entryway so suddenly his nephew did not have time to stop before he crashed into his back, yet Jin Guangshan did not so much as snap at him, too busy staring at one of the new arrivals.

The nephew — Jin Zixun, though one might be forgiven for forgetting that — ducked under his uncle's arm, and froze too. Hunched over, a sneer of displeasure and disappointment imprinting itself on his face. He recovered first. "Tang'ge! You're alive! After we dispatched an entire army to rescue or avenge you."

Jin Zixuan stepped forward, favoring his right leg, and bowed to his father. "Fuqin, your son has returned. My apologies for worrying you. I was unfit for travel until recently."

Jin Guangshan sputtered, turning red in the face.

If his legitimate son was alive, and not in Wen custody, then he had given up a truce and his advantage for nothing.

Only the disappearance of the heir to Lanling Jin could have forced Jin Guangshan to throw the entirety of his forces behind the Sunshot Campaign.

Disciples of the Nie, the Ouyang, the limping remnants of Jiang and Yao whispered among themselves that the sacrifice of Jin Zixuan would save them. If only Hanguang-jun and the innocent girl he tried to save had not been sacrificed along with him.

They sent their regrets to the Lan.

Yet the entry of the Lanling Jin to the field had only led Wen Ruohan to push his plans forward with greater intensity. The Sunshot Campaign crumbled under waves of the dead, and the coffers of Lanling drained along with it.

That Jin Zixuan had returned with the one man whose power might rival Wen Ruohan's might save them all, if Jin Guangshan could turn the situation to his advantage. The Yiling Laozu could be dealt with later.

He hoped his son had not made too many rash promises.

"I am greatly relieved to see you safe, my boy. We must welcome the one who brought about your return. Please come in." Jin Guangshan's smile was more slippery with oil. "Perhaps the servants might wait outside."

"Wen Qing is my first disciple." The Yiling Laozu's smile cut like an obsidian blade, so sharp and delicate it sliced the most vulnerable parts of its target before they noticed and left shards of itself behind. "She left Qishan Wen years ago, don't look so alarmed! But she stays with me."

Jin Zixuan abruptly needed the second woman, his friend Luo Qingyang's assistance to stand, so she entered the tent as well.

But wait!

This must be the woman Hanguang-jun risked everything to protect. The crowd was left in a flurry of excitement and chatter as the tent flap swung closed behind the Yiling Laozu.

Inside, the Yiling Laozu made his demands. "You want my assistance in the Sunshot Campaign? I want two things in return."

"Name them. I'm certain we can reach an agreement." Jin Guangshan smiled, certain this was a man he could understand.

The Yiling Laozu's first demand appeared to contradict his belief.

"Wen Ruohan's Yin Iron will have to be destroyed. You must allow me to purify it, rather than attempting any other method."

"Why would we believe you would destroy it rather than —" Sect Leader Yao was suddenly cut off by his good friend Sect Leader Ouyang slapping a hand over his mouth. Some among the sect leaders understood their danger, at least.

His interruption earned Sect Leader Yao a single glance, and he abruptly let all of his weight fall on his friend.

"I believe I've proven I *can* purify the Yin Iron by accomplishing what many generations of cultivators passing it back and forth has not. You've all sent people to check the Burial Mounds by now." They had, before the threat of Qishan Wen grew too great to ignore. "As for why you should believe me, I intend to build a sect in Yiling."

Yiling was among the territory taken from Yunmeng Jiang, but it had belonged to Qishan Wen as often as not. Jiang Wanyin, exhausted, young, and weary, did not protest. If he regained all of his territory but Yiling, it would be a worthy trade.

The foundation of a sect was an ambition Jin Guangshan knew how to handle. "I presume your second condition is related?"

"It is, in fact! I want a marriage alliance." It could have been a trick of light, but the Yiling Laozu's eyes appeared to flash red.

That was a demand that would have been less than ideal before the war. But with the fall of Lotus Pier, Jin Guangshan considered breaking his son's engagement. His wife remained in Lanling to defend their home, and could not gainsay him now. "The only daughter of the Great Sects is..."

Here, Jiang Wanyin spoke up. "Absolutely not."

"I did not say I was looking for a *daughter* of the Great Sects." The Yiling Laozu spun his dizi lazily.

"We have a daughter of marriageable age," Sect Leader Ouyang offered, gesturing between himself and his wife.

"I will only accept an alliance with the Lan. I'll trust their word." The dizi stopped its spinning to point at the man standing beside the Yiling Laozu. "I want Hanguang-jun."

No one present had ever seen Zewu-jun angry before, not even his brother. So, it was a shock to everyone when he turned red with rage.

"How *dare* you -" Zewu-jun collected himself, but his usual placid smile did not return. "Under no circumstances will I sell my brother."

"Surely you must see the advantages." Even the other sect leaders knew Jin Guangshan had only joined the campaign because his old friend, Wen Ruohan, denied all knowledge of his son's whereabouts. Now that his son and heir had returned, and it was clear the Wens were not the ones who had kidnapped him, he regretted his decision.

If the Yiling Laozu promised a quick, decisive end to the war, well. Other people's sons could be sacrificed. His own would not have been so great a trade, at this point. He could always pretend one of the dead mothers of his illegitimate children had been a secret concubine all along. Not the whore's son of course, seated at Chifeng-zun's side like he belonged there. The Mo boy, perhaps.

Fortunately, Hanguang-jun understood the importance of this alliance, even if his elder brother was sentimental.

"Xiongzhang, you are mistaken. The Yiling Laozu's condition of a marriage is not unreasonable. It would not be a sacrifice to trade my hand for the survival of all our sects."

Hanguang-jun's ears were flushed, perhaps with humiliation, as he bowed low to his brother. "This one requests the Sect Leader's permission to accept the Yiling Laozu's suit."

As Hanguang-jun's position had been made clear in public, with the Yiling Laozu himself in attendance, there was no reasonable course of action for Zewu-jun but to accept.

And, before all those assembled, the Yiling Laozu grabbed Hanguang-jun by the hand, and dragged him out of the tent.

"Ah," Jin Zixuan said, shuffling awkwardly when all gazes focused intently on him. "He does that."

The tent devolved into shouting and guesswork of all the things Yiling Laozu might do to poor, virtuous Hanguang-jun, if he dared to so infringe upon his dignity in front of the assembled sects.

"How noble! They say Lans only love once, and now Hanguang-jun can never be with that poor girl." Madame Ouyang, who could often be found leading her sect's forces in her husband's place, but who played at matchmaking in times of peace, wailed.

Luo Qingyang, the poor girl in question, looked perplexed by the sudden wave of sympathy cast in her direction.

"A tragedy for the modern age!" Sect Leader Yao lamented.

Zewu-jun's face had taken on a greenish tinge.

No one noticed when the newly returned Jin Zixuan wiped a tired hand over his face, mumbled something that would have sounded suspiciously like, "That could have gone worse," had anyone been listening.

### *Three Months Earlier*

When Wen Chao attempted to use an innocent woman as bait for a legendary monster, Lan Wangji did not think before he reacted.

Many of those present would later assume he acted out of love for her, as though there were no possible reason to do the right thing without an ulterior motive. These rumors would add fuel to the unfounded belief that Lan Wangji did not desire to be married to his husband.

In the moment, he simply grabbed Wen Chao's sword out of startled hands and used it to cut down the men holding Luo Qingyang hostage.

This would have ended very badly for him, had Lan Wangji not been mistaken in his belief that no one else would act.

Before Wen Zhuliu could react, crushing Lan Wangji's core as easily as a paper bird, Jin Zixuan pulled a knife, and held it to Wen Chao's throat.



And Luo Qingyang pushed a dead man into the water.

Lan Wangji wished he was surprised when the Xuanwu of Slaughter rose from the water, its head striking for Wen Chao's body, tossing it high in the air and swallowing it down whole. However, it was typical for the course of his life recently, ever since an ordinary meditation in the cold springs sent him on a doomed quest.

Wen Zhuliu decided to cut his losses, too valuable a servant to sacrifice even having failed in his mission. He ordered the Wen disciples and Wen Chao's whining mistress up the slope, closed in the entrance, and left them to die.

That, too, was typical.

With his assistance, Jiang Wanyin was able to locate an underwater exit once the Xuanwu of Slaughter calmed.

There was a need, however, for a distraction.

Lan Wangji was already injured. He would not swim well with a broken leg, and he would only slow down their escape on the other side. It made sense for him to be the one to stay and distract the monster.

Still, the confirmation that his sacrifice was taken for granted stung.

As the disciples waded into the water, Lan Wangji forced his spiritual energy through Wen Chao's unwilling sword, managing lackluster beams from which the turtle-snake recoiled. Not in pain, but as though it tickled. Wen Chao's sword was poor substitute for his own, but at least it was something.

The disciples of varied sects vanished one by one into the water, but as usual, there was one who felt the need to stir up trouble.

A sour-faced Jin disciple shoved Luo Qingyang into the monster's path. "That's for getting us into this mess, you gold-digging bitch!" He yelled, before diving for the bottom of the pool.

Jin Zixuan changed direction without hesitation.

He pulled her aside just in time for the tortoise-snake's teeth to sink into his own leg. Jin Zixuan screamed, and Luo Qingyang scrambled for a weapon, any weapon. She grabbed a wooden bow, rotting and long separated from its string, and wedged it into the monster's left nostril.

It let go of Jin Zixuan's leg to rear back, shrieking, and Luo Qingyang grabbed him under the armpits and dragged him towards the empty back cavern, out of reach of the Xuanwu of Slaughter.

Limping, Lan Wangji followed before the Xuanwu of Slaughter could recover.

He was not to be left to die alone in the cave after all.

Joy.

Lan Wangji collapsed in a dignified manner, putting enough space between himself and the other two so as not to invite discussion. Tragically, as Luo Qingyang extracted a bundle of herbs from her sleeve to treat Jin Zixuan's leg, he seemed to feel the need to feel the need to fill the air with chatter.

"What the hell did Wen Chao think he was doing, dragging us here without swords?" Jin Zixuan grumbled. "It's not like we could have done anything, and if Wen Zhuliu was busy being — ow! *Mianmian*— his bodyguard no one else could either."

"Stop squirming and this will be over faster." Luo Qingyang said. Lan Wangji had never paid her much attention — he took little notice of anyone who had not actively caused trouble, during the lectures at the Cloud Recesses — but he decided then that he liked her.

Practicality was a quality in short supply among cultivators.

Jin Zixuan looked like he would continue his ranting anyway, so Lan Wangji decided there was no harm in solving that mystery for him. Perhaps it would shut him up, so Lan Wangji could endure the last few days of his life in blissful silence.

"Wen Ruohan has been collecting tools that grant him control of resentful energy for a cost. Wen Chao was gathering them. I believe he thought the final piece was here."

"Just how I always wanted to die." Luo Qingyang tightened off the bandage around the poultice forcefully, making Jin Zixuan yelp. "Turtle bait."

Lan Wangji pointed out that it was in fact a tortoise-snake.

"It annoys me, so it's a turtle." Luo Qingyang insisted.

Fair enough. Most people did not care about accuracy as much as Lan Wangji, and he could not fault her reasoning.

He settled in to meditate, but was soon interrupted.

"I would have come back for you, you know." Jin Zixuan said. "As soon as I could grab the disciples for it. I don't suppose Jiang Wanyin will do the same."

Lan Wangji cracked an eye open, and wondered if he could pretend to have been asleep.

"He does hate both of you." Luo Qingyang laughed without humor.

Lan Wangji was not certain he agreed. Jiang Wanyin seemed like a man who paid his debts, when it was convenient for him to do so. Even if Lan Wangji had turned him in for punishment once, during the lectures, when he found Jiang Wanyin and Nie Huaisang experiencing the effects of alcohol in the bushes.

He had not considered that. If they could practice inedia for the week or so it would take for Jiang Wanyin to seek help and return... perhaps Lan Wangji might learn of his brothers' fate

after all.

Suddenly, he viewed Jin Zixuan in a more charitable light. He had helped when no one else had, after all.

Days of inactivity suited none of them.

Almost as soon as Luo Qingyang's poultice began to work, Jin Zixuan brought up a first idea to kill the Xuanwu of Slaughter.

"It is a near-mythical monster. I cannot just stab it." Lan Wangji informed him.

"Oh." Jin Zixuan slumped.

"I bet it's vulnerable under its shell, if we can keep it above water for long enough." Luo Qingyang suggested.

There *was* a technique that Lan Wangji could use, if the ropes left behind by the Wen disciples held, and he admitted as much.

Somehow, Lan Wangji was drawn into an attempt to kill the Xuanwu of Slaughter.

If asked, he would not have been able to answer how.

Luo Qingyang and Jin Zixuan would have said it was their burgeoning friendship.

Luo Qingyang played the distraction, this time, as the most mobile of them. She prepared to wave Wen Chao's sword around, using bolts of spiritual energy as weak as Lan Wangji had managed to produce from it — validation that a sword produced for Wen Chao was the limitation — while he assembled the Chord Assassination Technique.

Jin Zixuan waded into the beast's shell.

All seemed quiet, at first, but then the screaming began.

The screaming did not sound like Jin Zixuan.

There were too many voices, ringing through every bone in his body at a painful frequency.

The Xuanwu of Slaughter's head surged forth, swinging wildly towards the bolts of spiritual energy Luo Qingyang produced, but they were not enough to protect her.

A swipe of the snake-like neck sent Luo Qingyang crashing against the wall. She stirred, but did not rise.

Lan Wangji managed to loop the cords around the beast's neck in its retreat and held tight, though the ropes drew blood almost immediately. The Xuanwu of Slaughter — the *turtle* —

dragged him slowly down the gravel beach. A sudden pain in his leg indicated the healing fracture had worsened, but he ignored it, holding tight.

Despite his efforts and the streams of blood pouring from its neck, the turtle managed to get its head beneath its shell, and dragged Jin Zixuan out, clinging onto the source of the screaming.

Lan Wangji knew instantly that the rusty, blood-encrusted sword in Jin Zixuan's hands was the most dangerous spiritual tool he had ever seen, more dangerous even than the Yin Iron. It could wreak destruction across the world, transforming every land he had ever heard of into a wasteland, and reaching even beyond those distant borders.

The Xuanwu of Slaughter finally collapsed as his Chords of Assassination severed its neck in multiple places. Yet the sword remained in the air.

Jin Zixuan retained his grip for a single breath before he was thrown into the wall, landing close to Luo Qingyang. She dragged herself closer and shook him, but received no response.

Lan Wangji had just enough time to wonder what the sword had done before a wave of resentful energy crashed into him. The voices of a hundred thousand souls screamed in his head as his body collided with the slope, his head slamming back hard enough to make him see double.

He blinked repeatedly, attempting to clear his head, but nothing worked. There was pain and its absence all at once, a dizziness that grew stronger even as he failed to force his limbs to obey him.

The sword hovered in the center of the cave, releasing and gathering resentful energy in pulsating waves that grew with each cycle. Reaching for the only sources of life within grasp. Distorted faces emerged from the smoke, moaning in a dialect Lan Wangji could not quite understand.

Though perhaps that was the head injury that was slowly sucking the light from the edges of his vision.

Jin Zixuan still had not stirred. Luo Qingyang looked as terrified and helpless as he felt.

As a gaping skull made of smoke reached him, opening its jaw wide around his head, there was a deafening explosion from above.

Ear ringing silence followed. And light. A bright flash that expanded and blinked away, leaving more dancing spots of every and no color. The skull shrunk away, retreating into the sword.

Lan Wangji blinked, and there was a man hovering before the sword, robes made of blood and the night sky billowing behind him. He flipped a dizi between his fingers as he raised it to his lips, and played a song so harsh and lovely it would haunt Lan Wangji to his grave.

He blinked again, and warm eyes full of concern looked back. The eyes were set in a face made for smiling, with a jawline and cheekbones both delicate and strong.

*He's beautiful.* He thought.

That was Lan Wangji's last thought for quite some time.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you're enjoying this so far! I appreciate any kudos and/or comments, and you can find me on [twitter](#) or [tumblr](#). Please come say hi!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 2

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji officially meets the Yiling Laozu

## Chapter Notes

Thanks to JasmineTin (of no fandom social media) for betaing! She looked at flow, not spelling and grammar, so any mistakes are still mine!

A few terms I see less often in fic:

- Waipo: maternal grandmother
- Shibo: martial uncle older than mother
- Shigu: martial aunt

**No CW that I noticed!**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

He drifted in a warm, heavy darkness. A current flowed around and through him, soothing him to a space where his cares and fears had all the meaning of seafoam on a beach to be swept away by the next wave.

Once, maybe twice, perhaps more times than he would remember, the current carried him upwards, just long enough to breach the surface.

Warm liquid lapped against his lips. They parted. He swallowed it convulsively down.

“Good, there you go,” a voice said, “Now sleep,” and he was swept back into depths beyond the reach of turtles or water ghouls, beyond anything but the echoing song of silence.

When Lan Wangji woke it was to dim lamplight, and a beautiful man in black seated in a rattan chair, a book open on a desk. His attention was drawn to his hands, nimbly tying a knot into pale blue and silver cord, only occasionally glancing down at his progress as he manipulated loops and moved pins across a work board.

The man’s fingers were strong and clever, and not at all what Lan Wangji should be focused on. It was not only inappropriate to fixate on a stranger’s hands, but potentially dangerous,

considering he had no idea where he was. That he was alive, in far less pain than he last remembered, and did not appear to be tied to the bed was a mark in the man's favor, at least.

Yet the mystery remained of where he was, and why.

He forced his gaze away to examine his surroundings.

There were decorative knots hung on the walls as well, far more than would be usual to buy. Tied into animals, and flowers, and symmetric, geometrical plafond designs, they did not appear to be organized in any particular order. The room was small but lived in, with earthen walls that spoke to a cottage, rather than the sprawling layout of a sect residence. A home.

The sound of a child's laughter floated in on the breeze.

He was in a village, perhaps. But how?

Finally, he permitted himself to regard the man's face, and his breath nearly stopped in his lungs. This was not the beauty of a mortal, too lovely to be captured by the sharpest or most delicate brush strokes. Lan Wangji's talent was too poor to capture it, yet he ached to try, wanted to compose poems of lyrical longing of the sort on which his instructors had commended him for not wasting his time.

All this from a single glimpse.

Even as Lan Wangji's awareness sharpened, the roots of his soul returning home to heart, core, and mind, he could not bring himself to take back the sentiment.

Yet the crease between his brows was in dire need of smoothing. His was a face made for smiling, not the frustration that currently marred it.

Made for smiling — Lan Wangji had thought that before, of this same face. In the cave, when he tamed that ancient sword, steeped in evil for centuries, expertly manipulating techniques only two cultivators dared to touch. This was not Wen Ruohan — he was far too young and pretty — so it must be the Yiling Laozu.

There were those who said he was a monster in appearance as well as power, But there were also those who said he was so lovely that anyone who looked at him for too long would be burned up from the inside out by his brilliance.

Lan Wangji had assumed both sides exaggerated. But as he watched, Lan Wangji began to smolder just below his core, unable and unwilling to break the spell cast on him. As though a part of him that always rested just out of reach finally slotted into place, and it craved things beyond his understanding.

The Yiling Laozu finished off the knot with the application of a flame talisman, just as quickly smothered. He tied it to a tassel, and looked up. "Oh! How long have you been awake?" He exclaimed, vanishing the book into a qiankun bag hanging from a set of robes slung over the chair. One red, one black and silver — oh.

The Yiling Laozu was in his inner robes. The world swam as Lan Wangji attempted to tear his eyes away from the sliver of exposed flesh, showing the edge of his pectoral muscles. He failed.

As the Yiling Laozu approached, his shadow fell over Lan Wangji, and he was treated to a sharper view. It was not obscured, even when he shrugged on his discarded robes, belting the red one, but leaving the black, patterned with a glittering silver crosshatch, to hang open.

The embodiment of all he had been taught to hate and fear had saved his life, and Lan Wangji could not stop staring at his chest.

He must have hit his head harder than he thought.

“She promised you weren’t concussed anymore,” The Yiling Laozu muttered, contradicting him. “How are you feeling?”

Lan Wangji cleared his throat, hoping the excuse of disuse would hide his internal conflict. “Drained, but well. The two cultivators who were with me in the cave. How are they?”

“Okay, good! That’s a relief.” The Yiling Laozu pulled his infamous flute from thin air, and twirled it through his fingers before it blinked back out of existence. A casual show of power that seemed strangely nervous. “Mianmian is up and about and making herself useful. The Jin boy won’t wake up for another few weeks. He does *not* have the disposition to recover quickly from having his body flooded with resentment, plus the bite on his leg got infected, and he broke several bones.”

Lan Wangji blinked.

The Yiling Laozu spoke in a surprisingly informal manner, as though no one had taught him discipline. If he truly had come from nowhere, born from the unceasing agony of the Burial Mounds themselves to finally grant rest to its tortured souls, perhaps that was true.

Yet he seemed too... friendly... to be the product of nightmares.

And his voice. Lan Wangji could have composed an accompaniment on the guqin to underscore its rises and falls.

“How long...?”

“We kept you out for a week as a precaution, since you managed to concuss yourself, rebreak your leg, and very nearly fractured your spine.” The Yiling Laozu explained, as frank as any healer of Gusu Lan, though he suspected neither would appreciate the comparison.

A week where anything could have happened to Xiongzhong, during which someone might have reported his sacrifice to Shufu, in which Shufu might have found danger searching for them both. And here he was, sleeping the days away.

Laozu misinterpreted his expression. “But! You should be able to walk now, if you take it easy. I’ll go get you some food and then you’ll be up in no time. Do you like chilies?”



“No. Thank you, Laozu.” Savior or not, Lan Wangji did not intend to allow him to destroy his sense of taste.

“I see you’ve figured out who I am. But you’re not frightened?” The Yiling Laozu’s shadow seemed to lengthen, the very air around them to darken with his tone. He held up a hand and a trail of midnight ink curled around his wrist, twining up his arm, a pet snake ready to strike, infect, corrupt at its master’s command.

Wild and terrible, yet the wildness of a forest full of birdsong after a rainstorm, its predators still sheltered away, or a walk in a thunderstorm where the lightening strikes were spaced by dozens of breaths.

Dangerous.

But not now, not to him.

Lan Wangji *should* fear him.

Despite his disciplines, Lan Wangji had never been very good at feeling what he should. “Should I be?”

The Yiling Laozu startled, looking suddenly young. Not far from Lan Wangji’s own age. “So, you’re not entirely boring, just your taste in food. I’m not a threat. At least to you.”

Shadows retracted and resentment vanished as though it had never been.

Lan Wangji nodded his acceptance of his. Perhaps they would be enemies, still, but the Yiling Laozu would not have healed him only to kill him.

“In fact, I made this for you. The coin is a protective talisman of my own design.” He held out the decorative knot he had just finished, a formation of a pagoda-shaped pan chang knot and button knots with the coin tied just below the top loop. It was lovely and finely made, of a quality a disciple might purchase as courting gift to demonstrate serious intent.

Before he knew what he was doing, he reached up to accept, careful not to allow his fingers to brush against the Laozu’s. “Thank you.”

“Don’t thank me, don’t thank me.” He looked away, almost as though he was embarrassed, though the Yiling Laozu could not possibly feel embarrassment. “Waipo taught me so that I would sit still and focus, and now I make more than we can figure out what to do with.”

That certainly explained the decor.

“But you must be hungry. I remember, no chilies.”

Lan Wangji’s stomach rumbled audibly, indicating it was, in fact, ravenous. His ears heated. “I am also vegetarian, Laozu.”

“I’ll be back with boring then.” he said, and the clouds parted in response to his smile. “And only my enemies call me that. *You* should call me Wei Wuxian.”

Lan Wangji did not resume breathing until the Yiling Laozu — Wei Wuxian — left the room, humming an upbeat folk song. His heart beat along to the tune like it was dancing at a festival, though Lan Wangji had never done such a thing. Watched, and not quite wished to join in.

Only once Lan Wangji cleaned an entire bowl of fortifying congee, packed full of sliced century eggs, mushrooms, ginger, and coriander as well as a roasted sweet potato and drank a full pot of goji berry and ginger tea was he permitted to rise and venture outside.

He had not been housed in a cottage, as he imagined, but a small house built into the side of a sheer mountain, linked to others by a steep stairwell. Just beyond the waist-high railing made of sanded and lacquered tree branches, the world ended in mist. There was a golden shimmer among the gray, a net of spiritual energy Lan Wangji assumed was intended to prevent the unwary from tumbling into the endless abyss.

Wei Wuxian sighed mournfully. “We have a better view some days, but the world just doesn’t want me to impress you.”

The Yiling Laozu wanted to impress him?

Why?

Lan Wangji was just a young cultivator who had failed in his duty to stop the Wen before they could destroy his home. Wei Wuxian had achieved what even the Jiang dismissed as impossible in cleansing the Burial Mounds. He could have no need to impress anyone.

A pair of children ran by, giggling, unheeding of any danger.

Wei Wuxian put his hands on his hips as he called after them. “Hey! A-Yuan, A-Xi! Run on the grass, not the stairs or you’ll give your poor Xian-gege and Qing-jiejie a heart attack.”

They froze, slowly turning back with identical guilty expressions. A girl and a boy, of about seven and three years of age, respectively, their features too similar to be anything but siblings, even softened by youth. The girl was in robes suitable for sword practice, in pastel blue and pink. The boy, too young for such things, was dressed in a shade of brown on which no dirt would show.

“Sorry Xian-gege.” The boy wrung his hands.

The girl; however, rolled her eyes. “We know about the safety net.”

Wei Wuxian reflected that same attitude back at her. “Well, Xian-gege’s head knows about the safety net, but his heart doesn’t.”

She made a face at him. He mimicked it. Rolling her eyes again, she gave in.

“Who’s this?” The little boy asked.

Wei Wuxian lifted the small, inquisitive boy onto hip, and Lan Wangji gained a new appreciation for children. This one had such big, curious eyes, staring at Lan Wangji with his thumb in his mouth. “*This*, my little troublemakers, is Lan Wangji, he’s renowned far and wide as the most beautiful man in the world.”

Lan Wangji’s ears flooded with heat.

“Mianmian told me your name,” Wei Wuxian added, as an aside.

Clearly, he had the wrong person. “Xiongzhong is ranked the most eligible cultivator.”

Wei Wuxian scoffed, looking Lan Wangji over with such fire in his eyes that Lan Wangji had to fight the urge to check that his clothes had not been abruptly incinerated. “Obviously that’s because he’s the sect leader. I’m ranked fourth, and no one even knows what I look like.”

“Clearly that is why you are ranked *fourth*.” Lan Wangji did not know what had come over him to say that.

Wei Wuxian laughed, and that was somehow worse, the fire burrowing beneath his skin, making him want to dunk himself in the cold springs to smother it. “I’m going to choose to believe that was a compliment.”

It was.

Lan Wangji managed to regain enough control over his unruly tongue not to admit it.

“Do you want to help Xian-gege show his new friend around?” Wei Wuxian asked the children.

“Not really.” A-Xi turned on her heels, and flounced off up the stairs.

“I’ll help.” A-Yuan said, and buried his face in Wei Wuxian’s shoulder.

“Will you? Do you know where your Qing-jiejie is then?”

A-Yuan nodded rapidly, an exaggerated boneless movement characteristic of one so small. “By the new house with the new jiejie!”

“*Is* she?”

Lan Wangji did not understand the source of the mischievous glint in Wei Wuxian’s eyes.

He put it out of his mind to follow Wei Wuxian down the stairs, which Lan Wangji took slowly one by one with only a dull ache in his calf where there had been sharp pain with every step. He no longer had to steal himself against the desire to collapse into a fetal position and never move again before putting weight on his foot.

After walking from Gusu to Qishan, standing for twelve hours a day, shoveling manure, being dragged down a gravel beach by the Xuanwu of Slaughter... it should have taken far longer than a week to heal to this point.

“You have great powers of healing under your command.” He noted.

“Huh?” Wei Wuxian asked. “Oh, no, that was Wen Qing. Well, I suppose it was my spiritual energy, because she says it works faster even though she has plenty of her own. But I’m not the doctor.”

“*Wen Qing?*”

Was this all some elaborate ruse, and the Yiling Laozu was in bed with Wen Ruohan after all?

Of course it was too good to be true.

“Do you judge everyone by the failings of their distant relatives, Lan Wangji?” This time, Wei Wuxian’s eyes did not just turn red. They glowed. “Would you condemn healers and simple farmers for fleeing for their lives? Me, for taking them in? This is *Wen Yuan*, is it his fault his distant cousin —” Wei Wuxian cut himself off as A-Yuan began to scrunch his face up, gently bouncing him on his hip to calm him.

Lan Wangji could not imagine a willing ally of Wen Ruohan being so gentle with a child. He had jumped to conclusions far too quickly — a failure of discipline he would atone for later.

Yet there was a question he had delayed asking, apprehensive of the answer. It could be delayed no longer, no matter how unexpectedly charming his host.

“No, I do not. Please forgive my surprise. It is merely... do you have news of my brother?”

Wei Wuxian softened, shaking his head. “I haven’t gone down the mountain since I brought you here. I’ll go for news tomorrow.”

It had been far too long already. Indoctrination, the cave, his convalescence. Though he had not yet returned to peak shape, if he was finally free, he could afford to wait no longer. Anything could have happened to Xiongzhong in that time.

“Thank you for your hospitality. If there is any way I can repay you, please ask. But I must find my brother.” He bowed.

“Hey, wait, no —” Wei Wuxian reached out to him, and thought better of it, boosting A-Yuan on his hip instead. “If I don’t find news of your brother tomorrow, I’ll take you home myself. If I do, you can repay me by staying put until you’re fully healed before running off to die in a war. Acceptable?”

That was reasonable. If Xiongzhong was safe, it would be better to wait until he was no longer a liability to rejoin him, even if it caused Xiongzhong to worry. “Yes. Thank you.”

They resumed their path down the stairs, passing a group of four older residents enjoying a mid-morning pot of tea on a porch, and a stout female cultivator in black and white standing nearby, who Lan Wangji would have assumed was about forty, without the aid of a golden core. On second glance, he noticed there was a sword for all but one of the others balanced against the wall, though their robes did not conform to a specific color palette.

The seated cultivators called out an exuberant greeting, extolling Wei Wuxian to join them. “Can’t you see I’m busy? I can’t laze around in the middle of the day like all of you. What happened to meditation practice? Swords? If Waipo sees, she’ll send you all to the rice fields and take the next batch of fruit wine all to herself. Shigu, please keep them in line. Si-Shu is a bad influence.”

The standing woman nodded, seriously. “Of course, A-Xian, you’re clearly busy with important things.”

Wei Wuxian glanced at him and pulled a face, causing the corner of the woman’s mouth to turn up.

Perhaps not so serious, then. Lan Wangji was not an expert in judging moods.

Another flight of stairs down, they turned a corner, and Lan Wangji found himself on a wide, flat outcropping, where three youths perhaps in their early adolescence slashed and leaped and ducked through precise, flowing motions that reminded him of a fan dance.

Wei Wuxian called them slackers, which the youths apparently took as an encouragement to stick their tongues out at him in unison. As they were unsupervised, there was no one to chastise them for it — save for A-Yuan, who screwed his eyes up tight, stuck his tongue out, and blew a loud raspberry.

Lan Wangji’s eyes widened. That sort of behavior would never have been accepted in the Cloud Recesses, on anyone’s part. But no hidden elder jumped out of the woodwork to drag them off by the ears. He was the only Master of Discipline around, and it was not his place to regulate the actions of another sect’s disciples in their own home.

If this was a sect. He had not heard anything about the Yiling Laozu gathering disciples, though this mountain did not look like Yiling.

He had called the woman before Shigu — so perhaps not Yiling, but the sect he trained in? If so, it was unlike any sect he had ever seen.

Lan Wangji was wrong, it seemed, that no one was watching.

Dark trails of resentment coalesced from the stones under their feet, clumping together, and rising together to the height of a person, taking on a shape and form that floated just above the ground. It took an eternity, yet happened too quickly for his eyes to follow.

Between one blink and the next, Wei Wuxian’s eyes turned red. “Ah! Shibo, you started me.”

The ghost was an elderly man, aged until all that remained of his face was wrinkles, and a wide smile. He appeared to have been a cultivator, by his dress. Lan Wangji did not think he had ever seen a cultivator so visibly aged at his death. Among the Lan, elders tended to retreat into their own homes once — if — they reached a certain age.

If Lan Wangji had his sword, his guqin, any weapon at all, he might have swept forward and challenged the Yiling Laozu and his unorthodox path. More likely, he would have played

inquiry, to determine how he might send this ghost on to the next life, prevent him from influencing little A-Yuan at least.

But he stood frozen, as the ghost ruffed A-Yuan's hair — and the boy laughed.

The ghost's mouth moved, and Wei Wuxian nodded, as though he could hear the ghost speaking. "I'll let Shigu know. I can't take Yan'er out on an excursion until she lands that move."

A-Yuan tugged on Wei Wuxian's hair. He winced, and bopped the boy on his nose, laughing as the ghost wagged a finger at him, mouth moving with no sound.

"I'd like to see *you* manage him, Shibo, this one's worse than I was." The Yiling Laozu pouted, slipping into an exaggerated childish persona at odds with the crimson of his eyes. "No, that is not impossible you take that back."

Wei Wuxian had saved his life, used his own power to heal him, been nothing but kind and accommodating. He laughed when Lan Wangji said something funny — albeit unintentionally — without laughing at him.

Not a single person they'd passed had been frightened of the Yiling Laozu and his power. Now that the moment had passed, the appearance of a threat come to an end, Lan Wangji returned to his strange state of acceptance.

"Do you not perform soul quieting ceremonies here?" He asked, the politest way he could think to ask why a ghost was permitted to roam free around a settlement of cultivators.

"We do, if someone's actually born here, like Yan'er over there. A-Yuan was young enough to have one when he arrived. But Shibo was like most of us here — Waipo took us in too late to perform it." He rubbed the back of his neck, like he was concerned Lan Wangji might judge him for it.

Wei Wuxian kept mentioning his Waipo. Another ghost, perhaps? Or — a master talented enough to produce the Yiling Laozu might be near immortal. "Your shibo — he does not want to move on?"

"Not yet." Wei Wuxian smiled sadly. "There's something I need to finish first."

He stepped forward more quickly, leaving Lan Wangji no space to ask anything more. He hurried to follow. But still favoring his leg, it was not until they climbed a short but steep flight of stairs that he caught up.

Here, the fog opened up onto a second outcropping, filled with three square gardens, ringed with knee high walls made of bushes. Sprouts of root vegetables and leafy greens rose from their centers.

Wooden toys were strewn carelessly across the surrounding area, and A-Yuan squirmed out of Wei Wuxian's arms to go pick up a plush dragon puppet, losing interest in the "tour" at the sight of it.

On the other side of the outcropping stood a single house, and behind it a fence blocking off a path leading further up the mountain.

“We have small fields for rice and grains, and an orchard further down the mountain, but this is our garden.” Wei Wuxian was as proud as a king surveying his domain as he gestured at the vegetables. “The fence is to keep the live stock out. We have a few sheep and yaks and rabbits, but not for eating. That’s what the wild goats and geese are for.”

Lan Wangji brightened immediately. “Rabbits?”

“You Lan are all alike, aren’t you? What happened to no pets?” Wei Wuxian laughed. Lan Wangji was surprised he knew that rule, as he had never attended the lectures.

“There are wild rabbits,” Lan Wangji insisted, though he would have cared for Lan Yi’s rabbits if he had the chance. He hoped they had kept themselves safe when the Cloud Recesses burned.

On the side of the outcropping that rose steeply up toward the sky, sat two women. One of them was Luo Qingyang, looking quite recovered. She knelt on the sparse grass, hammering a nail into what looked like an unfinished bedframe. Another woman — Wen Qing, he assumed — sat nearby, tying bundles of herbs together to hang dry.

“Hey, Wei Wuxian, get over here and help Luo Qingyang build these things!”

“Always so bossy Wen Qing!” Wei Wuxian shook a finger at her.

“Hanguang-jun!” Luo Qingyang bounced to her feet and waved, swinging her hammer wildly over her head. Lan Wangji did not understand why, when he had clearly already seen her. “You’re awake! Can you believe any of this? I mean, the Yiling Laozu. What the hell.”

“No.” It was all very incredible. The thick mist did not help, making everything feel like a dream from which he might wake to find a hundred years had passed. “Why are you building a bed?”

She shrugged, but glanced tellingly at Wen Qing, who looked determinedly down at a knot she’d already tied three times. “I wanted to make myself useful.”

“Our population recently expanded with the Wens, so we don’t have enough beds.” He explained, as he worked. “No one was prepared when Wen Qing and I dragged the three of you here. Mianmian offered to help Wen Ning — Wen Qing’s brother, he’s probably off shooting down birds for dinner — build some new ones.”

That implied he had put someone out for an entire week. “Whose bed did I...?”

“Oh, mine. Don’t worry, I’m good on my sleeping mat.” Wei Wuxian spoke so casually.

Lan Wangji had to stare out into the mist and slowly count to ten before he could reply. “I apologize for the inconvenience anyway.”

“Wen Qing is sharing a room with Mianmian.” Wei Wuxian added.

“Shut up, Wei Wuxian.” Wen Qing grumbled, as Luo Qingyang beamed.

“I’ll get started on the second bed, shall I?” Luo Qingyang got up to roll a log out of the wood pile, and began the process of splitting it into planks by straddling the log and wedging an axe into its end.

“Wen Ning showed her how to do that the other day. I think she’s showing off to Wen Qing.” Wei Wuxian put up a hand in front of his mouth like that would prevent Wen Qing from hearing.

“Gossip is forbidden.” He said automatically.

“In the Cloud Recesses, I know.”

He knew?

Lan Wangji did not get the chance to ask, for two women exited the nearby house. Or rather, he realized as they approached, one living woman, and one fierce corpse. The fierce corpse was elderly, though not so old as the ghost had been, and in simple work clothes that marked her as a non-cultivator.

“Oh, Popo, is it naptime already?” Wei Wuxian asked.

The fierce corpse nodded. “A-Yuan,” She called, in a croaking rasp that might have been age, and might have been caused by her condition. Lan Wangji did not have enough experience with talking fierce corpses to tell.

A-Yuan ran up to the fierce corpse, and she took his hand, letting him lead her back the way they’d come.

Lan Wangji did not know what was stranger. That he felt no spark of terror at a fierce corpse walking off with a child, or that a four-year-old had allowed himself to be voluntarily taken from play for a nap.

The nap, he decided. Despite the black veins running up her neck and the unnatural gray of her skin, this woman was nothing like the twisted creatures sent to infect his people.

“Making me wait isn’t good for my ancient bones.” The second woman, who did not appear more than thirty-five years in age, complained. Her own robes were predominantly white, with accents of every color Lan Wangji had seen the presumed disciples wearing.

“Waipo, if your bones are ancient, why am I the one whose back hurts?” Wei Wuxian whined.

“Because you’re the one sleeping on the floor.”

Lan Wangji understood, now, where Wei Wuxian had gotten his unique personality from.

Wei Wuxian feigned a blow to the heart, stumbling away dramatically.



His impossibly young grandmother did not react. "Introduce me."

Wei Wuxian popped upright immediately. "May I introduce my esteemed grandmother, the immortal Baoshan Sanren."

Oh.

The Yiling Laozu had not carried him off to Yiling. He had realized that as soon as he saw the reality vanish on a cliff's edge and felt his breath shallow in his lungs. The Burial Mounds did not rise high enough that the air thinned, and Yiling was a populous city. This was a small village nearing the maximum population it could support. But he had been too preoccupied with other questions to ask the obvious one.

The truth was beyond what Lan Wangji could have possibly suspected.

For the second time that day, Lan Wangji thought he might faint. This time, he did not blame it on his injuries or even the thin mountain air. His uncle would have fainted dead away at the prospect of meeting Baoshan Sanren.

Lan Wangji felt proud that he only needed to sit down on a nearby seat, a convenient boulder that had clearly been set there for adults to watch playing children.

Baoshan Sanren frowned at her grandson, the Yiling Laozu. "You didn't tell him."

Wei Wuxian rubbed the back of his neck, chuckling nervously. "I was working up to it?"

"A-Ying."

"I got distracted."

"I'm certain you did." Baoshan Sanren sighed. "And you, young man. Do you speak?"

"My apologies." He bowed, and introduced himself. "I was merely surprised."

She smiled, and it did not share the same shape as Wei Wuxian's. They did not look much alike in the physical sense. But it held the same warmth. "My idiot grandson enjoys shocking people, I should have expected this. I blame his mother. She was my most troublesome disciple."

"Disciple?" Luo Qingyang asked the question Lan Wangji was too polite to give voice to.

"My mother was her disciple, but she left and couldn't return to the mountain. Waipo took me in and raised me after she died." Wei Wuxian did not seem offended, slinging an arm around his grandmother's shoulders. She was not a short woman, the top of her head brushed the tip of his nose as he squeezed her tight.

Shufu had been known to curse the name of a disciple of Baoshan Sanren. "Your mother was Cangse Sanren?"

"You know of her?" Wei Wuxian asked almost too forcefully.

“Not much.” He admitted, and Wei Wuxian wilted. For some reason Lan Wangji could not stand to see him frown, so he offered the one scrap of information he had. “She shaved Shufu’s beard once.”

Baoshan Sanren laughed, a sound very much like Wei Wuxian’s but without the entrancing quality. “Oh, that sounds very much like this one’s mother.”

“If your uncle looks anything like you, she did the world a favor.” Wei Wuxian teased.

Lan Wangji’s ears heated.

“Incorrigible flirt,” Baoshan Sanren and Wen Qing muttered at the same time.

Over Baoshan Sanren’s shoulder he spotted woman in the doorway of the house, holding tight to the doorframe as she slowly stepped outside.

“Ah —” He raised his arm to point, and Baoshan Sanren whirled around in a sudden panic.

“Please excuse me.” She rushed off to catch the woman and offer her support.

The second woman carried herself with a stooped posture, hobbling towards the fence in small steps despite Baoshan Sanren’s protests, her hair streaked with white. Yet when she turned her head suddenly, meeting Lan Wangji’s eyes, her face was unlined.

And impossibly familiar.

Lan Yi had been dead for hundreds of years, her spirit finally consumed by the Yin Iron only months earlier. Yet there she was.

After a few moments more arguing, Baoshan Sanren finally scooped Lan Yi into her arms, and carried her off along the path, heading towards the mountain peak.

Wei Wuxian ducked into view, reaching out toward him, but not quite touching. “Lan Wangji? Is everything all right?”

“Fine,” he lied, though his heart was racing.

## Chapter End Notes

- The foggy mountain was inspired by the time my study abroad class hiked to one of the peaks in Huangshan. (It was a great time and we got some clearer views the next day!)  
[Fog by a railing. my classmates \(faces cropped\) having no sense of self preservation at the edge of the world](#)
- This wwx does a lot of crafts to keep his hands busy and to help out around the village!

The main reference I used for decorative knotting was [this one](#)

- If having wwx address his adoptive grandmother's students/mother's martial siblings this way makes no sense, please let me know!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 3

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji is definitely trying to recruit an ally and not falling in love;

## Chapter Notes

Happy Birthday to Lan Wangji! 🎂🌟

The first part of this chapter is a flashback! My apologies to Hanguang-jun for posting the tragic part of Wei Wuxian's backstory on this day, but this chapter does also contain flirting?

Please note that I've aged Wei Wuxian up a few years! He's ~25 to give him more time to have established himself as YLLZ, Lan Wangji's ~20 so he's still young enough for Wen indoctrination camp

**CW:** mistreatment of kid wwx while on the streets. I tagged for graphic violence just in case & I don't think this is very graphic? but mentioning this time anyway!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

*Many years ago, on a day that hid its dark portents under a too-bright sun, a little boy laughed as his mother swung him around in the air, pretending at sword flight.*

*“Wife,” the boy’s father said. “The farmer saw the beast dragging the child off towards the Burial Mounds. She couldn’t see if he was still alive.”*

*“If there’s even a chance, we must go after it.” The boy’s mother replied, a strange furrow appearing between her eyes. “You know that, husband.”*

*“Yes, that is the promise we made. It’s only —” The boy’s father looked off into the distance, and when he looked back, he did not continue. “The farmer promised to look after our son for the day. I told her your instructions, if we don’t...”*

*“Good.” The boy’s mother knelt before him. For once, there was no laughter in her. “A-Ying, do you have your token?”*

*The boy kept sucking on his thumb as he rummaged in his pocket for the token. When he found it, he held it up for his mother's inspection, grinning like his smile held a second sun. It was a disk of obsidian as thick as the boy's thumb, carved with characters the boy had not yet learned to read but nonetheless instinctively understood.*

*"Remember, if A-Niang and A-Die do not return, you find a tree with deep roots and call for A-Niang's master." The boy's mother hugged him, and kissed him on the forehead. His father did the same.*

*The last the boy saw of his parents was his mother turning back to wave at the edge of the forest, and their backs, disappearing within.*

*The boy waited for hours and hours, but what finally came out of the trees was not a person.*

*The farmer his parents had set to watch him gasped, and ran, screaming without bothering to look back for the boy. In the end, it was the farmer's cowardice that saved the boy. He stood rooted, scarcely breathing, as the beast lunged after the farmer.*

*The beast was not a creature that could be found anywhere other than the Burial Mounds. It was impossible to tell whether the beast had once been human or animal, tree or stone, whether it had been formed living or dead, for it gave the appearance of all these things. Grotesque, rotting limbs sprouted from crag-like planes, crumbling leaves sprouted from seeping blackened wounds gouged into its sides.*

*As the beast came down on the farmer with a speed that should not have been possible for its massive size, the boy watched. A maw of jagged teeth appeared from the mass of limbs, snapping closed around the farmer's neck. Her screams cut off instantly. The boy watched, still, as the farmer was dragged off towards the Burial Mounds.*

*The beast was not heard from after that day.*

*It was a comfort, as the boy learned the ways of the streets of a cruel, uncaring town, that his parents had won their last battle, even as they lost.*

*There were few trees to be found in the town. None, the boy felt, had deep enough roots. With time, he forgot to keep looking.*

*Though boy's fingers grew nimble and his feet grew quick, he was far too small and alone to win against the older boys who bullied him because he was the only thing weaker, the shopkeepers who had no heart to spare, the dogs, left to grow a taste for flesh on the streets. But the boy was clever, and he scavenged enough to survive.*

*One day, a shopkeeper all the street children knew to avoid caught him fiddling with his token and snatched it away. It was too fine for a street urchin like him, the shopkeeper said. The boy could only have stolen it.*

*Despite the boy's sobs and protests, the shopkeeper did what he had accused the boy of, and stole the one thing he had left of his parents.*

*The one thing that could save him.*

*In another world, perhaps a friend of his parents would have come looking for him, when word of their death finally reached a land of lakes and flowers. In another world, the friend might have found the boy and taken him home to raise as not-quite his own. But in this world, the man 's only son had just been born after a difficult pregnancy, and he could not leave his wife to lead his land alone.*

*By the time he came looking, the boy was long gone from the world of men.*

*It was after the third time the dogs attacked that the boy decided to steal it back. He dragged his injured body to the local doctor, who pitied the boy enough to spare a splash of baijiu and clean rags for bandages, and decided to take back what was his.*

*The boy thought and plotted and came up with a plan well-suited to a child of perhaps six years of age.*

*There was a rooster in town, that was constantly escaping its pen. It was not difficult for the boy to lure the rooster into the thief 's shop. The rooster flapped its wings and crowed just as he'd planned, its nails skittering across the ground as it avoided the shopkeeper's attempts to catch it.*

*The boy slipped into the shopkeeper 's rooms in the back to search for the token. It was not difficult to find, for the shopkeeper had tossed it on a table in the midst of an assortment of other trinkets. Snatching it up, the boy snuck back through the shop.*

*It was only on the threshold of the door that the shopkeeper noticed. "Thief!" He called, the rooster finally caught in his arms.*

*The boy dashed away without a second thought. He ran, and kept running as the shopkeeper and other townsfolk chased him until he reached the forest that surrounded the Burial Mounds outside town, which none dared to enter. He did not give himself the chance to hesitate, and soon after he crossed the tree line the angry voices calling after him faded away.*

*This was where the boy 's parents had disappeared, but the beast that had killed them was long gone. He walked up the overgrowth path, greeting every shadow like an old friend.*

*Shadows did not have teeth to bite, and so the boy had no reason to fear them.*

*The trees grew thinner the higher he climbed, until the path ahead ended in a seething wall of darkness.*

*He knew instinctively that he could never survive it as he was. His parents could never have survived it. Nothing fully mortal could.*

*Yet near the boundary of the darkness, there grew a tree. Ancient and powerful, its trunk was wide, and its leaves glistened with the green of vitality. Its thick roots rose out of the ground, and plunged deep within.*

*The boy remembered, then, that his mother had told him to find a tree with deep roots.*

*This, then, must be one such tree.*

*Holding up his token, the boy approached the tree. When he set it against the tree, it sank into the bark to half its depth.*

*“A-Niang’s Shifu?” the boy asked the tree tentatively. “Are you there? Can you bring my parents back to me?”*

*For a long moment, there was no answer.*

*But then, a tear opened in reality, swirling in an iridescent rainbow. It was tall and wide enough for a man the height he might one day grow to step through without stooping.*

*Perhaps this was where his parents had gone, he thought. Perhaps they had been unable to return as they ’d promised, and were waiting for him on the other side.*

*The boy stepped through the tear in reality, and vanished.*

Lan Wangji did not see Lan Yi again in the three weeks it took Wen Qing to deem it safe to wake Jin Zixuan. He was introduced to every other person in the community, but his ancestor was not so much as mentioned.

The fog cleared on the morning of his third day. Lan Wangji eased himself out of bed, careful not to wake Wei Wuxian, sprawled with his inner robe parted across his chest on his new bed. Exiting the little cliff-side house, he intended to find a quiet to meditate until the village of self-sufficient cultivators and refugee farmers rose. He froze in place in the doorway.

The world opened up before him. The sheer drop off of pleated rock overlooked a tree-lined valley, with a cleared weiqi board of fields climbing the tiered ascent of another sharp peak on its other side. Forested mountains with bare crag-like peaks were scattered in the distance, still laden in a light mist. Baoshan Sanren’s mountain dwarfed them all, rising into the clouds.

It was a painting framed in the pink and orange of dawn. He did not know how long he stood there as the sky lightened to blue, and the glare of the sun pricked at his eyes.

“I can think of far more pleasurable ways to wake me up if you want my attention.”

Lan Wangji did not know how to respond to that, except to stare at the disheveled mess of Wei Wuxian’s hair, an alternative that was only slightly less affecting than his bare skin.

Xiongzhong was well, and had joined the army gathered at the Unclean Realm. It was set to march on Qishan any day now, or perhaps already had. And so Lan Wangji kept his word.

His leg finished healing quickly, sped on the rest of the way now that Lan Wangji was able to direct his own energy towards that purpose. The best thing he could do now was train, and push his skills to new heights while he bided his time.

And he had a more than worthy opponent, for the Yiling Laozu did not only fight with a flute.

“Sometimes I wonder if you’re really trying to skewer me,” Wei Wuxian laughed in delight as he spun out of reach of a thrust to the abdomen that very nearly got through his guard.

He paused to admire the swirl of Wei Wuxian’s robes as they settled. If asked before the cave, before the Yin Iron, before Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji would have wanted to shut that laughing mouth with the hilt of his sword. Or would have thought he wanted to. Now, he never wanted him to stop.

So he said, “Would it take?” and aimed for his leg as a new peal of laughter rang out.

“Ah, Lan Wangji, Lan Wangji. You can make me laugh, but it won’t help you win.” He danced backwards, planted his foot on a boulder, and somersaulted backwards to land lightly on the roof of Min-qianbei’s house, Wei Wuxian’s Shimu he had met the first day, which was closest to the training grounds.

Lan Wangji threw himself after him, relishing the way he seemed to hang, suspended and weightless, parallel to the ground, for a long moment. Before unfolding, and striking from overhead, his entire weight behind the blow.

Wei Wuxian blocked, using Lan Wangji’s own momentum to send him crashing into the shrubs lining the mountain wall at the rear of the house.

They always seemed to end up on the rooftops, no matter how far away they began. It was not long before the dizzying distance to the ground ceased to bother him, and he slashed and leapt across the tiles as readily as Wei Wuxian.

“Don’t you dare ruin my roof again, it’s supposed to rain tonight!” Min-qianbei called up to them from the ground.

“Sorry, Shigu!” Rather than jump to the ground or halt the spar, Wei Wuxian simply moved to the next roof, daring Lan Wangji to chase him up the mountain. He caught up, and Wei Wuxian engaged his blade in a flirtation, exchanging a series of parries and feints and thrusts before disengaging, and dancing out of reach.

Wei Wuxian could have put him on his back with ease at any moment. With only a casual flick of resentment, he could knock Lan Wangji’s borrowed sword from his grip, and pin him to the ground. That he chose not to, that he seemed to enjoy the push and pull of their dance, only added to the thrill.

The only equal Lan Wangji ever had was his brother. They had not been able to surprise each other since Lan Wangji’s night hunts and Xiongzhang’s desk work allowed him to catch up in skill level.



Everything about Wei Wuxian was a surprise.

His creativity, his kindness, the brightness of him in spite of the dark. Every combination of fluid strikes that forced Lan Wangji to improvise just to keep up.

This, Lan Wangji thought, was what fun felt like.

The thrill of a challenge in those laughing eyes, his breath coming quickly as he chased after more, knowing he could never have enough if it went on forever.

But Wei Wuxian's foot slipped on a tile, and Lan Wangji pressed his advantage while he steadied himself.

The point of his sword rested beneath Wei Wuxian's chin, and Lan Wangji thought for a moment that he had finally won. Until Wei Wuxian's lips curved upwards into smug satisfaction, and he tapped his sword against Lan Wangji's thigh.

Another draw.

Lan Wangji thought he preferred it that way.

Winning one, losing the next, coming to a rest weary and exhilarated as they both collapsed, panting, on a roof. Enjoying each other's company, until Wen Qing yelled at them to come down and make themselves presentable for dinner.

It was not her duty. She simply enjoyed ordering people around.

Evenings on the mountain were communal, a time to work on projects and study, and spin tales that no one bothered to pretend were only for the children.

He had learned that Wen Yuan and Wen Xi's parents were missing, conscripted to aid in Wen Ruohan's war effort before Wen Qing met Wei Wuxian and extracted the rest of her family. Wen Popo, the elderly fierce corpse, had asked Wei Wuxian to make it possible for her to care for the children, after an accident while tending the goats. She had been a ghost at the time, but acted no different than a living person, anchored in her body until her descendants returned safely, or the children grown and settled.

Lan Wangji had not thought it possible he would find a soul's delay in moving on acceptable. Yet Wen Popo's reasons were admirable, and the methods much safer — or so he was assured by not only Wei Wuxian, but Baoshan Sanren herself — than the average haunting of an orphaned child.

The reasons the *actual* ghosts remained on the mortal plane were less forthcoming.

Ghosts, plural. Three of them, floated and talked amongst themselves in the corner of the cozy dining hall, eclectically furnished in bright colors and adorned with landscape paintings and calligraphy as well more of Wei Wuxian's decorative knots. Occasionally, they called on

Wei Wuxian for a brief translation exchange, or holding a conversation with one of the handful of disciples who played a stringed instrument over Inquiry.

“It’s weird they know a Lan technique, right?” Luo Qingyang whispered to him one evening, in between bites of her mutton in chili sauce — Lan Wangji had thankfully been provided with a simple but flavorful tofu stir fry. She had decided their experience in the cave made them friends, and Lan Wangji did not know how to gainsay her.

Though he was beginning to accept the persistence of her friendship — Luo Qingyang was certainly a more appropriate and less confusing friend than the *Yiling Laozu* and he rather enjoyed her company — it was not Lan Wangji’s place to give away Lan Yi’s secrets. “I suspect part of what they are hiding.”

She hummed in tune to the strumming of Inquiry. “Is it a good reason?”

He nodded. “I believe so.”

“Good enough for me. Keep up whatever weird flirting you’re doing, and I bet Wei Wuxian will go to war for you.” Before Lan Wangji could contradict her false assumptions, she turned back to Wen Qing, leaning well into her personal space and resumed their conversation. “Qing-jie, you have to teach me that trick. Every time I try to mend my robes it falls apart the next time I wash them.”

Wen Qing pretended to be focused on sewing as she looked at Luo Qingyang from the corner of her eye. “This is a trick.”

“Yes.” Luo Qingyang brushed her hair over her shoulder as she tilted her head, exposing the expanse of her neck.

Wen Qing sighed, overdramatic, even as she soaked in the view. “Give me your hands, I’ll guide you through darning the rest of these pants.”

Luo Qingyang, bolder than Lan Wangji could ever imagine being, extended her hands for Wen Qing to take. Wen Qing wrapped the fingers of one hand gently around a needle, guided the other to pick up the fabric, and began the least efficient sewing lesson in history.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, drawing his attention back where it belonged. His hands were busy nimbly stitching together braids of yak wool yarn, dyed a bright crimson, to make a child-size cloak. “Lan Wangji, play me a song.”

“Will you join me?”

Lan Wangji had not yet had the opportunity to experience the musical skill of the *Yiling Laozu*. He would regret missing the opportunity.

But Wei Wuxian demurred. “My playing is nothing suitable for the ears of one so refined.”

Lan Wangji doubted that if, as he assumed, Wei Wuxian had learned from Lan Yi.

Nevertheless, he was ambushed by the youngest residents of the mountain. “Zhan-gege, Zhan-gege, please play a song.”

Lan Wangji was incapable of resisting A-Yuan’s wide eyes, and his sister was almost as adorable. “What song would you like?”

He played a few short ditties at their request before Wen Popo retrieved A-Yuan for bedtime.

“I didn’t think the great Hanguang-jun would know children’s tunes.” Wei Wuxian teased. “You’re full of secrets.”

“Not so many as the Yiling Laozu.”

Lan Wangji should not have said that. As Wei Wuxian stared at him with lips parted, he thought he might see the Yiling Laozu again, and part of him relished the thought, but the moment passed.

“True, true.” Wei Wuxian laughed it off.

The conversation would have ended there, if Baoshan Sanren had not looked up from spinning Yak’s wool into yarn to say, “Take the opportunity to play something pleasant for once. I know you haven’t forgotten how.”

“Waipoooo,” Wei Wuxian whined, sticking out his lower lip. But when that had no effect on the sharp angle of his grandmother’s eyebrow, he pulled Chenqing from the air. “You pick something. I’ll join in.”

Lan Wangji would not insult the Yiling Laozu by questioning his ability to learn a song by ear. He picked a folk song he had overheard a musician playing on the steps of an inn in Caiyi once, and overcome his usual reticence to ask its name in exchange for silver. It was rather more sedate than the disciples of Baoshan Sanren usually played on their eclectic collection of instruments, but more energetic than anything of Gusu Lan.

Wei Wuxian joined in after only a few notes.

His playing was anything but the clanging of a thousand dropped pots, as Lan Wangji had heard it described, but a melody that melded with his own so seamlessly they seemed to create a new instrument between them, capable of harmonizing with itself.

When the last note drifted away, their audience was silent.

“Someone dear to me loves that song.” Baoshan Sanren said. “Excuse me.”

She got to her feet, and left the hall before anyone could reply. The others, one hundred and seven residents in total, forty-three long-lived cultivators from the mountain and sixty-four Wen, returned slowly to their conversations. The Wens, less affected, led the way. Wen Ning began to play a hand slapping game with A-Xi, and her giggling allowed the others to begin stilted conversations over whose turn it was to collect the eggs from chickens kept at a lower altitude, and who had to do the dishes.

The ghosts disappeared entirely.

Lan Wangji had ruined the evening and he did not even know how. He apologized, helpless, with his eyes.

Wei Wuxian shook his head, tossing Chenqing into the air so it vanished with an audible pop. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just — it’s been a while since anyone here has played that.”

“Was this song written by Lan Yi?” Everything seemed to lead back to the one person everyone refused to speak of.

“Ah?” Wei Wuxian jolted back, confirming he was correct, yet Lan Wangji was immediately filled with the desire to reassure him.

“She and Baoshan Sanren — they were close.” He used the word ‘were’ intentionally, and the stretching of the truth tingled unpleasantly on his tongue. “I met her spirit once, she told me.”

“Oh! Yes.” Wei Wuxian relaxed, scooting his cushion closer to Lan Wangji’s.

It was difficult, on evenings like these, to remember that he could not stay there forever.

Wen Qing decided to wake Jin Zixuan from his induced sleep not because he was fully healed, but because it had reached the point where continued inactivity presented a greater danger.

There had been a waxing quarter moon on the first night Lan Wangji fell asleep listening to Wei Wuxian talk in their shared room. It was a new moon the night Wen Qing removed the needles keeping Jin Zixuan unconscious for the final time.

When Lan Wangji first woke, Jin Zixuan had been unnaturally pale, as though the pigment in his skin had been replaced with chalk, his veins standing out in his skin, so dark a blue they could easily be mistaken for the ink of a fierce corpse. Wei Wuxian had not been lying when he said Jin Zixuan had reacted poorly to the sword’s resentment.

Lan Wangji had spent little time at Jin Zixuan’s bedside, but he had peaked in a few times in passing, while Luo Qingyang was spending part of her day reading and keeping him company. He improved so slowly Lan Wangji hardly noticed the difference. But Luo Qingyang related her favorite quotes back to him, as though he was listening.

Baoshan Sanren’s Mountain — Wei Wuxian had skillfully dodged Lan Wangji’s attempts to learn if it had another name — possessed a comprehensive library. He should not have been surprised. Baoshan Sanren had lived for centuries, and the mentions of trade, students plucked from the outside world, the disciples’ apparent experience in night hunting, so many small details he observed indicated she did not live so isolated an immortality as legend claimed.

The library was built into a series of caves leading upwards towards a temple at the peak, the only place from which Lan Wangji had been expressly forbidden from visiting. The caves were shielded from the damp by talismans, and lit by glowing balls of light that blinked into existence when entering a section, and out as soon as he left.

If not for the war, Lan Wangji could have lost himself in that wonderland until he crumbled to dust alongside the last book.

There were compilations of the standard cultivation theories, organized by subject, sexagenary cycle of writing, and the grandmaster's opinion of the author. Rare texts Lan Wangji had believed unavailable outside the Cloud Recesses. Works of Lan Yi that he *knew* could not be found even in the Forbidden Section, for he had poured over every text available more than once. Volume after volume of priceless treasures from the hand of Baoshan Sanren herself, and her disciples of ages past.

There were also shelves of the classics and poetry, and a wide selection of what Lan Wangji politely refused to call anything but romantic imaginings. Luo Qingyang alternated between Baoshan Sanren's writings and a tale of star-crossed love between women from rival sects that spanned five volumes.

She claimed it was educational.

Wei Wuxian, too, insisted his grandmother curated the selection with the intent to provide useful resources for her disciples.

Lan Wangji looked away after a single glance when Wei Wuxian attempted to share one of his favorites during his initial tour of the library, though the image there was not explicit. Merely the lines of a figure in the opulent garb of an emperor beginning to strip for a someone reclining.

"I've re-read it so many times, Lan Wangji, I promise it's not what you're thinking."

In his own home, Lan Wangji might have ripped the book from his hands and torn it to shreds. Because he was Wei Wuxian's guest, because the image showed nothing more than a hint of skin, because his ears, his cheeks, his chest flushed with warmth as he wondered why Wei Wuxian wanted to share such a thing with *him*, Lan Wangji managed to resist the urge.

"I will use my time here to improve my cultivation," he said when his tongue finally detached from the roof of his mouth.

Wei Wuxian snapped the book shut, a thunderclap in the silence of the dimly lit library that rushed through him like lightning in miniature, a tingling that branched from his core to his fingers and toes. "Of course, what was I thinking? Let me help you find some good battle music scores, none of my frivolous nonsense."

Lan Wangji was not disappointed that he did not push.

He spotted the same book a few days later, propped open face down on Wei Wuxian's pillow. On the bed now across the room they still shared.

He devoted himself to learning the scores in the secret writings of Lan Yi on a guqin that belonged to a long-dead disciple, and could not look Wei Wuxian in the eye until the next time they sparred.

Xiongzhang was alive and fighting. Or had been when last word made its way to Yiling. Wei Ying had brought back updates from Yiling several times already, and promised Lan Wangji could accompany him on his next trip through that slash of swirling colors in the air that Lan Wangji could only glance at from the corner of his eye. He looked forward to seeing the truth behind rumor for himself. But though he was healed, he could not return without Jin Zixuan, or without a way to end the war.

Lan Wangji sent up a wish on an imaginary lantern that Xiongzhang would hold out long enough for Lan Wangji to return, having mastered techniques Wen Ruohan's twisted puppets could not stand against. And — he hoped — an ally to change the tide.

Xiongzhang was fighting. Nie Mingjue was fighting. Even Jin Guangshan was at the front, if not the front lines. But without Wei Ying's power, Lan Wangji did not believe they could win. He had spent weeks with the Yin Iron suppressed and held to his heart. Xiongzhang was strong, but he could not win.

From what Lan Wangji had learned of him, he did not believe Wei Wuxian would countenance the massacre, if not of the sects, then that of the common people that would follow, as Wen Ruohan's use of the Yin Iron slipped and spun out of control.

For this reason, Lan Wangji was careful not to ask too many questions. Not about the sword from the cave or the dangers of Wei Wuxian's demonic cultivation, and not about Lan Yi.

Jin Zixuan had lost weight while kept unconscious, only roused for long enough to swallow water without choking on it. He was a skeleton of himself, but he no longer looked like a corpse. Lan Wangji was there when they woke him because Wei Wuxian was, to ensure the residual resentment did not surge when he woke.

He seemed to follow Wei Wuxian everywhere these days, whether he willed his feet to or not.

The resentment did surge, and Wei Wuxian pulled out Chenqing, guiding it back to quiescence with purposefully harsh scales. And so Jin Zixuan's first sight upon waking was the Yiling Laozu at full power.

Lan Wangji would have been content to watch Wei Wuxian like this for eternity, but Jin Zixuan's response was likely more appropriate.

He shrank back into the mattress and flung the covers over his head. They only made it over his eyes because his muscles had atrophied.

Luo Qingyang laughed at him, leaning on Wen Qing's shoulder, and he peaked over the edge, annoyance with his best friend beating fear.

"I'll let the three of you talk it out. Tell him I don't actually eat babies, will you?" Wei Wuxian left, his shoulders ever so slightly slumped.

Lan Wangji wanted to chase after him, but that would have made it look like he was bewitched into catering to the Yiling Laozu's every whim. So he stayed.

Reluctantly.

He hoped Wei Wuxian had gone to find the children, and not a dark corner of the library to lose himself in.

Jin Zixuan bore Wen Qing's check ups, because they unanimously decided not to inform him that he was among Wen until he calmed down about the Yiling Laozu. She, too, left as quickly as possible, abandoning him to sit in silence while Luo Qingyang explained the situation. With every word, the crease in his forehead deepened.

"So clearly he's gotten to you." Jin Zixuan said, when she was through. "This can't actually be Baoshan Sanren's mountain. There's no way an immortal would support demonic cultivation."

"Good to know you think I'm that easy to trick." Luo Qingyang grumbled.

"He has treated us well." Lan Wangji said.

Luo Qingyang threw up her hands. "Without him, you'd be dead. And worse, one of the souls trapped in that fucking sword you pulled out of the turtle. It's not like he's feeding us to his fierce corpses!"

"Let us not insult fierce corpses that way," he said.

"You're right, Popo would never." Luo Qingyang agreed.

Jin Zixuan looked at them like they had decided to take a leap off the steepest cliff of the mountain. "He's the Yiling Laozu! It's more suspicious that he's *not* feeding us to his pet fierce corpses. He must want something from our families."

Of course a Jin would have difficulty believing it was possible for someone to give aid out of the goodness of their hearts. The depth of the Jin coffers did not come from lending aid to the poorest families.

Luo Qingyang merely lifted a brow, conveying her disdain for that assertion. "From my aunt's bakery...?"

"That doctor's clearly taken a liking to you. But us?" He gestured between himself and Lan Wangji.

Lan Wangji wanted to be left out of this nonsense.

Luo Qingyang sighed. “Koi Tower really taught you not to trust anyone.”

“It should have taught you the same thing.” He snapped.

“Wow.” Luo Qingyang stood, dusting off her hands on her robes unnecessarily. “Lan Ergongzi, please accompany Jin-gongzi on the rest of his walk. I’m going to spend time with someone who isn’t waiting for me to stab them in the back.”

Understandable. “Please give W- your guniang my regards.”

“Who said anything about her? I’m going to see if Si-Shu has a jug for me to split with the Yiling Laozu.” She rolled her eyes at his expression. “And okay, yeah with her. Your glare is a torture instrument.”

Luo Qingyang left.

Which meant it was up to him to talk Jin Zixuan down.

At least he could not yet get out of bed?

“I can’t believe you stole my best friend.” Jin Zixuan muttered,

How was it his fault if Luo Qingyang had decided Lan Wangji was better company? He certainly had not encouraged her. “I did not steal her. You should take more care in your words.”

“I’m aware of that.” Jin Zixuan sighed, sinking further into his nest of sheets. “I either speak without thinking or I don’t speak at all.”

“I can relate to not speaking.” He wished he was not speaking now.

Jin Zixuan huffed out a breath of air and launched into a coughing fit. When he recovered, he said with tears in his eyes, “I suppose you can.”

Perhaps he been more effective in convincing Jin Zixuan than anticipated. “Wei Wuxian has done us a kindness beyond what could be expected, and this is the home of an immortal. Please, show the requisite respect. We may need their aid for reasons you do not yet know.”

Jin Zixuan did not reply.

Jin Zixuan was not in his bed.

At some point during the night, Wei Wuxian had left the house without warning. This had happened once before, and Wei Wuxian had returned in the afternoon, pretending he was not falling over with exhaustion more spiritual than physical. As his first choice of companion was not presently available, he had intended to seek out Luo Qingyang to see if she wished to spar and practice her newly learned techniques, predicting that Wen Qing would also be gone.



Luo Qingyang had made up with Jin Zixuan, to the extent that she was willing to keep him company on his mandatory bed rest, so Lan Wangji expected to find her there.

He did. As she raced out the door and ran into him, knocking him back against the wooden railing. Lan Wangji caught himself before he could topple over it and test the integrity of the spiritual energy net. He assisted Luo Qingyang regain her balance, and stepped away to an appropriate and comfortable distance.

“There was a note. He thinks he’s going to catch Wei Wuxian and Baoshan Sanren and Qingjie in some kind of dastardly plot. I think he tried to follow them to the temple at the peak.”

This was why no one should count on Lan Wangji to be persuasive.

“I called her Wen Qing yesterday. He said he understood, but —”

They exchanged a glance, and ran. Down and across the training field, through the gate past Baoshan Sanren’s house, left open to the goats and rattling in the wind, and up the path beyond it.

Jin Zixuan had dragged himself to the peak on hands and knees by the time they caught up. He coughed weakly, and pulled himself forward across the uneven stone on his belly, too disoriented to recognize their arrival. He must have begun his journey in the night to make it this far in his condition.

Even Lan Wangji panted from the exertion, the air this high was unnaturally thin, compared to that of the village. He had to pause to circulate his energy from the rapid ascent before seeking to stop Jin Zixuan’s progress, as did Luo Qingyang.

The delay was enough to reduce his panic, and give him the space to take note of nearby occurrences.

Harsh oscillations of discordant notes, more like the screeching of a hawk than any music he had ever heard, rang out as though it was formed from the air itself. Only the strength of the resentment pouring from the temple gave it a source.

He leapt forward, aiming to stop Jin Zixuan — and froze, as the view through the temple’s open doors became clear. Wei Wuxian stood at the center of the room, his eyes glowing red as he directed a dense stream of resentful energy, heartbreakingly devastating, a god in the making.

The sword from the cave hovered before him, a piece of Yin Iron orbiting it unevenly just to the side, swinging towards the iron and repelled, like it was trying to join together, and Wei Wuxian’s demonic cultivation prevented it. The stream of resentment stemmed from the two pieces of Yin Iron, wrapped around Wei Wuxian like the caresses of an obsessive lover. And on its other end —

Lan Yi lay on a stone slab padded with wool blankets, hair fanned out to the sides, now more white than black. She writhed, bunching the blankets together, her face contorted with pain, with every pulse of the resentful energy linking the sword to her core. Baoshan Sanren held

Lan Yi's head steady, preventing her from slamming it against the slab, a halo of blue energy expanded around her, sealing the resentment inside the temple.

Wen Qing stood over her, eyes closed with her fingers clamped around Lan Yi's wrist.

Lan Wangji was too distracted to notice when Jin Zixuan pushed himself to his knees, and crossed the last of the distance to the temple. Luo Qingyang cried out, leaping to stop him, but he tossed an ornament from his belt into the barrier just as she pinned him to the ground.

The ornament crumbled into ash.

The discordance cut off abruptly as Wei Wuxian lowered the dizi from his lips. "Lan Zhan, I can explain."

Wei Wuxian had never called him that before.

## Chapter End Notes

My nurse friend's biggest pet peeve in fiction is when someone in a coma is given water through the mouth, because the patient will inhale it. So the detail of jzx (and lwj last chapter) being briefly woken for water mid plot-convenient coma is for her!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 4

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji finds out some of what's going on

## Chapter Notes

Happy Lunar New Year everyone! 🐯

A-Ma is what Wei Wuxian will be calling Lan Yi from now on. I got some help from the WIP bang language and culture channel on that

**CW:** single line mention of jgs coercing sex from women (when mianmian is arguing with jzx), fainting/seizure

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“Lan Zhan, I can explain.” Wei Wuxian’s knuckles were white around his dizi as his eyes faded back to their natural shade, lined with anxious anticipation and concern.

Lan Wangji was the jade statue he had long been compared to. Unable to react or even to know what he was feeling.

Lan Yi opened her eyes and groaned.

Luo Qingyang gasped, putting a voice to the shock he could not express.

Baoshan Sanren helped her into a seated position. With difficulty and a voice hoarse from screaming, Lan Yi spoke. “I’ve told you two before that keeping secrets causes more problems than it solves.”

“Dropping everything on someone at once does no good either.” Baoshan Sanren sighed. “As we’re seeing now.”

“Just to be clear, they weren’t conducting horrific experiments on you, Ayi?” Luo Qingyang asked from where she knelt over Jin Zixuan’s prone form.

“Not at all. They’re attempting to save me from my own mistakes.” Lan Yi smiled wanly.

Lan Wangji turned his back, thoughts racing, nails digging crescents into his palms.

“Lan Zh— Lan Wangji?” Wei Wuxian was at his shoulder, hand hovering just above his back, as though afraid to touch.

He stared determinedly at the ground, but found his voice, speaking softly. “I would like to hear the explanation.”

“Yes — yes. Over tea? A-Ma needs to rest, and your stupid friend needs medical care. Again.” Wei Wuxian’s laugh held a hysterical edge.

Despite this — whatever this was — Lan Wangji needed to reassure him. “He was very stupid.”

And what *had* Jin Zixuan been thinking, dragging himself up the mountain when he was still half-dead?

“I’m sorry I hid her from you. I — it’s complicated.” Wei Wuxian trailed off.

“You will explain.”

“I — Yes.”

When they reached Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi’s house, Lan Yi was promptly tucked into a nest of colorful blankets. Baoshan Sanren ensured she was propped up but swaddled up to the neck.

Jin Zixuan’s cloth litter was settled on the ground and Wen Qing began her work. She was none too kind in her examination, and at the end of it, put a damp cloth over Jin Zixuan’s face to wake him up.

He gasped and sputtered and glared.

“Are you ready to listen?” She demanded.

Jin Zixuan’s veins, still the blue of a convict’s faded tattoo from residual resentment, jumped in his face. He opened his mouth to protest, but then — spotted Lan Yi suffering the minute adjustments of blankets her wife was making, and stared blankly.

“Close your mouth, xiao-gongzi, you’ll let in flies.” Lan Yi said.

Jin Zixuan shut his mouth, and nodded. “I’ll listen.”

“I hope you mean that this time.” Luo Qingyang grumbled.

“I do!” He triggered a wet coughing fit with the force of his insistence.

“How did you even end up there? You were nearly bed-ridden!”

“He *is* bed-ridden now, the damage you did to yourself will take at least another month to heal.” Wen Qing folded her arms, and Lan Wangji hoped he would never be on the receiving end of her displeasure.

“I heard a noise, and when I looked outside, I saw the Yiling Laozu carrying an unconscious woman. What was I supposed to think?” Jin Zixuan demanded, propping himself up on his elbows only to be pushed back down by both women.

“You could have come to find someone instead of nearly killing yourself!” Luo Qingyang scolded.

“Lan Wangji was making moon eyes at the Yiling Laozu! You were flirting with a Wen!”

Admittedly, that was suspicious at first glance. The difference was Lan Wangji and Luo Qingyang had seen that Yiling Laozu save their lives, and so had been able to see past old prejudices to the treasure trove that lay beneath. Jin Zixuan had not.

Perhaps now he would.

“Your father spends his time dragging women who can’t say no into his bed!” She shouted.

He reared, back as though seeing her for the first time. “Mianmian—”

She shook her head. “Not me. But if we’re all damned by association and all the rumors are true, then what does that say about you?”

Jin Zixuan sighed heavily staring up at the ceiling. “You’re right. It’s just — I thought they’d done something. To both of you.”

“If they did, they would have done it to you too, idiot. Or did you think you were immune?” Luo Qingyang went to elbow him playfully, then seemed to remember that would make him cough up blood and keel over, and tapped him lightly with it instead.

Jin Zixuan grumbled.

“I’m going to keep flirting with Qing-jie.” Luo Qingyang said, more to Wen Qing than her injured friend.

Jin Zixuan grumbled again.

Making good on his promise of tea, Wei Wuxian pushed a warm teacup into Lan Wangji’s hands, startling him into meeting his eyes for the first time since the mountain peak. His breath caught at the concern he saw there.

“You should sit,” Wei Wuxian said, and Lan Wangji found himself cross-legged on a worn red and black striped carpet without conscious thought. Wei Wuxian was already handing a pair of cups, one painted with a barely recognizable dragon, the other with a child’s fingerprints to Luo Qingyang. He brought a fourth for Baoshan Sanren to feed to her thoroughly swaddled wife, and took a seat on the edge of her bed while Wen Qing served herself.

Lan Wangji looked down at the teacup in his hands. It was unusually deep, chipped at the lip and painted with faded pink flowers in a child's hand. Some disciple of ages past had likely made this, a reminder of the long, peaceful history of this village he had so easily fallen in love with. A testament to the methods of its matriarchs.

He inhaled the fragrant scent of jasmine, took a sip, and breathed.

The calm that had been evading him spread outward from his core.

The room was warmly furnished. A delicate pair of knot-work phoenixes he recognized as Wei Wuxian's took pride of place over the bed, but there was also pottery, whittled carvings, and paintings of widely varying age covering every inch of the walls.

Not for the first time, he thought that these women were indulgent of their charges, in a way Lan Wangji had never seen. Save in distant memories of his mother, and her careful preservation of his first scribbled attempts at calligraphy.

"Lan Yi-qianbei, how is it that... May I ask how..." Lan Wangji was rarely at a loss for polite phrasing, but he struggled to put the words *how are you not dead* into an appropriate format. She had been a spirit, and faded before his eyes. Yet here she sat in the flesh, being fussed over by Baoshan Sanren — her *wife* — and the Yiling Laozu — her *grandson*.

"How I am sitting before you?" She offered, with that same hint of smugness he had noticed in her when first they met. "You met a part of my spirit, sent to watch over the Yin Iron in the Cold Pond Cave. After the energy I expended in materializing to meet you, I could no longer maintain it, and that part returned to me. It was steeped in resentment from centuries near the Yin Iron, and its return worsened my condition, as you see now."

"We were attempting to remove it from her permanently, but that seems to be impossible without all the pieces." Wei Wuxian rubbed the bridge of his nose, his shoulders slumping in exhaustion. "But I owe you more of an explanation than that."

He began with the story of a boy, as though he could not speak of his past without detaching himself from it.

*The boy stepped from the edge of death to a precipice among the clouds, and the air was stolen from his lungs. He fell to his knees, and when he looked up, a pair of women hovered over him, their features shadowed by a halo of sun.*

*The boy blinked up at them. The sun was not this bright in Yiling.*

*"Now what's this?" The shorter and younger-looking of the two women asked, bending to pick up the token that had fallen from his hand. "Where did you get this?"*

*He snatched the token from her fingers, clutching it close to her chest.*

*"I didn't steal it!" He had only retrieved what was rightfully his.*

*“I didn’t say you did. I made that token, and someone taught you how to use it. Who gave it to you?”*

*The boy realized then that the woman’s voice was not unkind.*

*“A-Niang. A-Niang said she’d come back, but then —” He sniffed like a child much younger than he was now. “Are you A-Niang’s Shifu?”*

*“This is A-Yue’s child.” The second woman said. And though her face was unlined, her hair still dark, her posture unbent, there was a strange fragility to her. She cupped her companion’s cheek, wiping away a single tear with her thumb. “I know you still had hope she merely lost the ability to return.”*

*“They’re all taken from us eventually.” A-Niang’s Shifu replied. And, as though it had been agreed upon without speaking, they sank as one to a cross-legged seat.*

*The boy could see them more clearly now. One in pale green with floral embroidery, the other in a gradient of whites and pale blues. The boy had never had the attention of anyone so finely dressed before, yet they sat before him, unafraid of dirtying their robes. Against his will, he was put at ease.*

*“What’s your name?”*

*The boy had to dredge the knowledge from deep within himself. He had not needed a name for almost as long as he could remember. But there it was — his mother’s voice calling him A-Ying, teasingly calling his father Wei-didi — and he remembered.*

*“Wei Ying.”*

*“Would you like something to eat, Wei Ying? I believe we’re having chicken with peanuts and chilies today.” A-Niang’s master smiled, and the last dregs of his fear faded away.*

*Wei Ying bounced to his feet and nodded rapidly until it made him dizzy.*

*It took Wei Ying a year to stop squirreling away bits of food under his bed. It took him half that time to start calling Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi his grandmothers.*

*Wei Ying was nothing they weren’t used to, they would tell him years later, though he always got the impression that he was a unique combination of problems — traumatized, distractible, and too clever for his own good. When Waipo stopped in the middle of a lesson a week after his arrival, his first thought was that she intended to kick him out. She had realized she was mistaken, and he didn’t have potential as a cultivator after all.*

*Instead, she handed him a ball of thin red cord, a handful of pins, and a board full of dozens of pinpricks. He stared down at it, and looked up at her, uncomprehending. “When I was young, many, many years ago...”*

Waipo paused until he asked the expected question, hesitant, “You were young?” She, her wife, and the eldest of the disciples made that joke constantly. Wei Ying was old enough to find it silly, but young enough to humor her.

“It’s hard for me to believe sometimes, but yes. I was constantly reprimanded by my own teacher for not sitting still, not listening, but I built up my core anyway. I figured out this trick the first time I had a student like myself.”

“What does that have to do with this?”

“Well, my little troublemaker, I’m going to teach you some knots. And maybe you’ll find it easier to remember all the steps to circulating your spiritual energy.”

Wei Ying was surprised to find that it did.

Lan Yi was of the opinion that children with difficult backgrounds began to feel comfortable when they felt useful. If they were helping to put food on the table for everyone, they inevitably began to believe they belonged. Therefore: chores.

She and Baoshan Sanren had never officially adopted a child before. The disciples they took in were usually older by a few years, and remembered parents whose memory they would not disrespect by claiming their legacy for their own. But when Wei Ying appeared on the mountain peak, when he came to them, they each took one look at him and thought, *this one’s ours*.

Still, they had not wanted to show favoritism. But before they even asked, the disciples took one look at Wei Ying, and insisted.

*You were the only mothers A-Yue ever knew*, their eldest disciple, who would one day choose to delay his next life out of worry for Lan Yi, insisted. *She would consider it an honor*.

*I needed a teacher; when I came here, not a mother*, Xiao Xingchen said. A disciple her wife had recruited only the year before at the age of ten, he was the sort of child who took pride in his maturity. He liked to care for his two age mates, and had to be surreptitiously slipped any form of indulgence or care. *He needs parents*.

The encouragement was unanimous, and so Wei Ying was theirs.

Lan Yi taught him to garden and tend livestock and carry a tune, Baoshan Sanren taught him handicrafts. He learned quickly and enthusiastically, and rarely asked for help. That was something he would never truly learn, and there were fits of frustrated tears on the rare occasions when he could not find what he needed after a few hours in the library. When he started experimenting with talismans, it was necessary to keep a close eye on him so he didn’t damage himself more than the occasional singeing of his eyebrows.

Wei Ying also belonged to everyone. Though Baoshan Sanren preferred to teach the basics herself, as centuries of experience allowed her to sense minute changes in spiritual energy,



her elder disciples often taught the day-to-day sword-work classes. Wei Ying took to swinging a sword as readily as he had to swimming in the streams and hot springs of the mountain. It wasn't long before he was at the level of the students a few years his elder.

Fortunately, Wei Ying was charming and humble, and Baoshan Sanren did not pick her disciples for ambition. Xiao Xingchen in particular, delighted in having a sparring partner who challenged him, though he realized early that Wei Ying would surpass him. His golden core developed at an equal rate.

Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi began to hope, perhaps far too early, that they would not lose their grandson as they had so many disciples before him.

"Waipo," Wei Wuxian, ten years old and newly presented with a courtesy name and a sword of his own, whined. "I can't decide on a name. You name it for me."

"That would be cheating." Baoshan Sanren scrawled down the names of two of her disciples to handle an infestation of undead snub-nose monkeys. Troops of them kept popping up along the path that appeared when residents of the nearby villages needed to find her, no matter how many times she took care of the problem, which had worsened in recent years. The regular sort of monkey was bad enough, but the undead sort liked to steal scalps, not snacks.

"Waipoooooooo," He flopped down on his stomach on the first rug they'd made together, when she had taught him how to weave. Its simple red and black stripes, his favorite colors even then, were well chosen to hold up against many a similar fit of theatrics.

But this was not Baoshan Sanren's first time dealing with an overdramatic child. Even if she was beginning to look for the right first night hunt for him, several years before she would usually consider it. The three students four years his elder had only just returned from their first night hunt with a pair of their elders, liberating the ghost of a petty old man harboring a grudge over his neighbor's habit of singing at dawn.

Wei Wuxian was more than capable of defeating a minor monster or exorcising the average ghost, but he was so very young. Yet if she waited much longer, it would be an insult to his skill. The only solution was that she accompany him herself.

*After* he named his sword. "You may ask others their opinion, but you must choose for yourself."

"It's just — my sword will have this name forever! I can't just change its name and pretend it was different all along, like Yan'er with her doll! What if it's terrible and I hate it in ten years? Shishu chose such a fitting, poetic name and here I am with a list full of things like 'starless night.'"

"The name of your sword does not have to be a feat of poetic creativity. You're clever, A-Xian, but your ability to quote the classics does not make you a poet," she told him. "You'll know when you have the right name, because it fits you."

Wei Wuxian did not try to ask his A-Ma, for Lan Yi would only give the same answer as her wife. He did, however, show everyone else his list — and it wasn't long before he scratched out all of his ideas, because his martial aunts and uncles laughed at them all.

He balanced on his sword on one foot, his eyes closed, and his arms outstretched. Balance was key to mastering sword flight, and he intended to have free reign of the sky before his next birthday. He wanted to dive for the ground with the fearlessness of a hawk, soar with the confidence of an eagle, maneuver as gracefully as a —

“You're not really naming your sword ‘mountain moon.’” Xiao Xingchen startled him, and Wei Wuxian lost his balance.

Tumbling off, he caught hold of the hilt before he could plummet to the ground several lengths of his body below. There was no real learning without risk, in Wei Wuxian's opinion, and his reflexes had not failed him.

Besides, he could do a lazy flip and land lightly on his feet from this height, easy. “No, I'm not, Shishu, that would be silly.”

“You put it on the list.”

“I put everything I thought of on the list. They're all *terrible*.”

“You could always pick something terrible. Because you're a little terror.” Xiao Xingchen had a way of teasing like he was reciting the classics before an emperor.

“You're the one who followed A-Ma down to the market without permission.”

“You put chili sauce in Shijie's red bean buns!”

“Only some of them, and it tasted good. Waipo agreed.” As had several of the others. Waipo had just picked Xiao Xingchen up from somewhere with horrible food. Probably Lanling. Everyone agreed Lanling was the worst.

Or maybe Gusu. A-Ma could only handle the barest hint of chili, and Waipo said it had taken her centuries to build up that much of a tolerance.

“I can't describe the terrible things that did to my mouth. You're not human.”

How did he sound so calmly graceful even when delivering childish insults? Wei Wuxian had tried to study his mannerisms, but he hadn't been able to figure it out. And then he'd gotten distracted wondering if he could sew a talisman into his gloves so he could safely stick his hand in the fire when the impulse crossed his mind.

He was still working on that one, but he'd been made to promise to try it on clothing that did not contain his hand in the future.

“Unfortunately, I am, but I don’t plan to stay that way! Thanks for the vote of confidence!” He was going to be the one to stay with his grandmothers forever. Everyone knew it. It was just a matter of growing up.

“Maybe you should name your sword ‘delusions of grandeur.’” Xiao Xingchen suggested.

“I’ll consider it!” He grinned with all his teeth when Xiao Xingchen turned on his heel and walked serenely away.

Wei Wuxian sprawled on the mountain peak, lost among the clouds, after a day spent hauling hay up from the fields to replenish their stock. Supposedly, it was a good activity for a young man with a growing golden core. He was fairly certain his grandmothers had just wanted to give everyone a break from his indecision over his sword’s name.

Ironically, he thought he had one.

A shadow fell over him and he peaked open one eye to see his Waipo staring down at him with an amused quirk of her mouth. “That’s certainly a face you’re making. Am I right in thinking you’ve made a decision?”

Wei Wuxian exaggerated whatever expression he was making. “I think... Suibian.”

“Are you going to finish your thought?” She asked.

“I did.”

Waipo knew what that meant. She clapped her hand over her eyes, swiped it down to cover her mouth, and spoke through her fingers. “You want to name your sword ‘whatever.’”

“Yes! It’s perfect. Is there a word that describes me better?”

“I suppose not. There certainly isn’t a word you say more often.” Everyone said his laugh sounded like Waipo’s — that his mother had picked it up, just like he had. He hoped so.

“Whatever.” Wei Wuxian grinned, exposing his missing corner tooth, and received a pat on the head for his trouble.

“I’ve never had a student take this long to choose a name, and my grandson goes for whatever.” Clicking her tongue against the roof of her mouth, Waipo shook her head, fondly mocking. “Yes, that’ll do nicely. Shall we go find your A-Ma and Shibo to perform the engraving?”

Bouncing to his feet, Wei Wuxian took her outstretched hand, carrying Suibian at his side.

As he swung their hands between them, Waipo asked, “How would you like to go on a night hunt with me?”

Wei Wuxian bounced on his toes, nearly sending himself tumbling head first down the steps of the path. “Do you mean it? Really?”

“It’s a simple thing, because I want you to handle it.” Waipo said, as though he cared if it was simple if he got to see a village that wasn’t *this* village, or Yiling. “We have an undead rooster attempting to get rid of its replacement.”

He snorted. “I’m going to fail my first night hunt when I can’t stop laughing!”

“You don’t think it’s too easy?”

That was obviously a test, and he wasn’t going to fall for it. Besides, an undead rooster attempting to preen for the hens sounded hilarious.

“Never say something is too easy or you’ll find a fox spirit where you were expecting a minor haunting. You taught me that.” He squeezed Waipo’s hand, bumping against her side. “It’s perfect.”

Wei Wuxian hoped it was secretly a demon rooster.

It was.

A-Ma found him scribbling in the margins of a text on water ghouls in the library. Waipo was planning to take him to night hunt some in a few days, and he was bristling with excitement. It was the first time she was (intentionally) taking him to hunt something truly dangerous. “A-Xian, the rabbits escaped their pen. Help me gather them, please.”

Sticking his brush behind his ear, his ink pot in his sleeve, and the book back on the shelf, Wei Wuxian grasped A-Ma’s arms to deliver the most important news of the day. The rabbits escaped at *least* once a week. A-Ma had bred them to be far too smart. “A-Ma, did you hear? I beat Shishu today!”

“You told me yourself, yelling it from the rooftops.” A-Ma bopped her finger against the tip of his nose, and began to lead the way out of the cavernous library.

“Aha. Ha. I was excited.” Rubbing the back of his head, he fell into step with her.

“How did your Shishu feel about that?” A-Ma asked. She liked to make him admit when he’d gone too far, because she believed it made him learn better.

But he’d really only boated for a minute. “He said he expected it, and asked me not to gloat too much. That was my last gloating, I promise!”

As they stepped into the sunlight, Lan Yi shivered, chilled though it was a fine spring day with little wind to speak of.

The rabbits were in the gardens, as usual. Wei Wuxian really needed to get around to making a rabbit-repelling talisman. Maybe then they'd stop escaping their nice, warm pen full of rabbit treats.

Wei Wuxian scooped one up just before it could gnaw on the kailan he was so proud of, and it promptly began chewing on his sleeve as he supported its hind legs against his chest. It took them five trips carrying two rabbits each. By the time Wei Wuxian deposited the last of them, the rabbits had left a vegetable casualty count of a dozen radish leaves and several trampled early cabbages.

“Stay this time, I’m warning you.” Wei Wuxian scrunched up his face and gestured between his eyes and the rabbits to signal he was watching them.

Lan Yi laughed. “We’ve tried that how many — how many —”

The left side of her face twisted suddenly, unnaturally, and she collapsed, convulsing to the ground.

“A-Ma,” The rabbits scattered away as Wei Wuxian dove to catch her before her head could bounce, helpless to do anything but hold her as she shook. “A-Ma!”

When she stopped, she did not wake. Her breathing was rapid and shallow, her pulse weak and thready.

Wei Wuxian was tall for his age, with a strength built from carrying heavy bushels of rice and buckets of water. He was scared that if he tried lift her on his own, he would hurt her, and he did not dare leave her behind to go find help. He was not carrying a signal flare in his own home, but maybe that didn’t matter. What was a signal flare but a talisman?

Ignoring the rules of safe talisman use, he scrawled characters in the air, and sent his spiritual energy upwards so it exploded in a shower of sparks. It was unrefined, as messages went, but it was not long before Waipo dropped to her knees at her wife’s side.

## Chapter End Notes

Sorry for that ending! I needed to split the flashback somewhere and my beta (who likes angst more than I do) said this was the best spot. She really helped get this one into shape!

[Promo Tweet for this chapter](#)

# Chapter 5

## Chapter Summary

What's wrong with Lan Yi? is finally answered, Jin Zixuan has a good idea, probably his first ever.

## Chapter Notes

I messed with the timeline of Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi's backstory a bit, which was completely intentional and not at all because I didn't realize Lan Yi was a few generations down the line from Wen Mao and elected to ignore it when I did realize.

Thank you for all the comments! I'm behind on answering again, but I appreciate them all <3

**CW:** Discussion of Lan Yi's illness (she'll be fine in the end I promise, I updated the tags to reflect that)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

If Baoshan Sanren had learned one thing in her centuries, it was that keeping secrets from reckless youths only made them more likely to jump off a cliff to learn what lay below the clouds.

Wei Wuxian was thankful for that trait, when he was permitted to accompany A-Ma to her sick bed. As Waipo fed a heavy stream of spiritual energy to her, he tended the incense and wiped the sweat from A-Ma's face and neck with shaking hands. He had only seen her personally give spiritual energy once before, when one of his elder martial aunts had wanted to see Yan'er's birth before she passed.

He burned through an entire bundle of incense sticks before she woke.

Wei Wuxian had not been silent for so long since he first came to the mountain.

As Waipo propped her up, A-Ma stayed limp against the cushions. Waipo brushed A-Ma's hair back from her face, and took one of her hands in hers. They exchanged a soft, sad smile.

Wei Wuxian reached for A-Ma's other hand and was relieved when she squeezed back.

"Did you know this would happen?" He asked, though he feared he knew the answer.

Waipo sighed, a rush of air released by the opening of a door to a long-forgotten room. “We hoped it would not come to this. At least not for years to come.”

“We never wanted to burden you with this knowledge in your youth. We wanted you to have time to grow at your own pace.” That was A-Ma, comforting him when she was the one lying there, drawn and pale.

“I need to know.”

He needed to know, because then he could *help*.

Wei Wuxian was only eleven years old. But if there was a way to save his A-Ma, he would find it.

“You do.” Waipo gestured for him to take a seat on one side of the bed, as she did the same on the other, and began her tale. “When we were much younger than we are now, and had not yet left the world, there was a man who attempted to master powers that were not meant for a mortal.”

A-Ma interrupted to say, “Your waipo had already cultivated to immortality, but only just, and I still had one foot in mortality.”

Waipo continued. “The cultivation world looked different then. The Lan were the only sect with any influence to speak of, due to Lan Yi’s efforts to build the sect beyond her grandfather’s vision. The Qinghe Nie were little more than butchers, the Lanling Jin merchants with high aspirations. Jiang Chi, the founder of Yunmeng Jiang, was nothing more than a babe-in-arms.”

“Wen Mao, of course, had recently founded his own sect, and his old friend Xue Chonghai was...” A-Ma broke off to cough into a cloth Waipo held up for her.

“We assume Xue Chonghai was jealous of his accomplishments, after Wen Mao killed the divine beast Qiongqi, but we don’t know for certain.” Waipo wiped blood from A-Ma’s lips as she spoke. “Whatever his reasons, he found a monster, and instead of killing it, used its living blood to forge a terrible weapon. The Yin Iron. Part, he left with the monster, to ensure it could never come for him. We never found it. The rest...”

“He murdered Wen Mao’s family and fled to his home near Yiling, what would become the Burial Mounds. He destroyed all those who came for him, until Wen Mao.

“He wanted to gloat, so he let Wen Mao through. We learned of Wen Mao’s plans to face him alone too late, and followed him with our friend Chang Liyan. By the time we arrived, Wen Mao had slain him, and Xue Chonghai’s creation was destabilizing. We couldn’t destroy it, but we could break it, and that was enough to stop the devastation of the Burial Mounds from spreading across all the land.”

Wei Wuxian had heard of Wen Mao, of course, but he had never heard this story. Never knew that the Burial Mounds that had stolen his parents were a human creation, not of demons or angry gods. A *person* had done that to them, left him to survive on the streets for years. Him

and so many other orphaned children, so many thousands of victims. He wanted to laugh, and to hide away and sob in the darkest corner of the library until he forgot he ever learned this.

He did neither.

“We each took a piece to hide. But instead of hiding it, I tried to use it. I thought I could find a way to use it for good, or if not destroy it forever.” A-Ma cleared her throat, looking away. “Instead, I bound myself to it.”

He gasped, tightening his grip on her hand. “A-Ma!”

“Not you too. My wife has lectured me enough for that over the years.”

“Impossible, after the risks you took.” Waipo said. “We sealed it away, and retreated from the world to found this village.”

“To protect A-Ma.”

“And to protect the world from me.” A-Ma went on before he could ask what she meant. “Ever since I’ve used my connection to keep watch over that piece. It’s drained me slowly over the years — that’s why your waipo is such a fresh-faced daisy compared to me.”

A-Ma winked, and as always, Waipo flushed. “Even now you tease me, Niangzi?”

“If I don’t, no one else will.” A-Ma held her chin high, using the haughtiness she claimed was the fault of her Lan upbringing to make Waipo laugh. Her laugh was watery, but that trick was still infallible.

A strange bit of normalcy on the second worst day of his life. It made him feel just the slightest bit better. “What happened today? Why now?”

A-Ma slumped back into her pillows, the burst of vivacity draining from her. “Today, someone found a piece of the Yin Iron, and used it. Every time they use it, it will drain me more.”

“Can’t we go to where it was and find out who?” That sounded like a simple enough fix. Waipo could defeat whoever it was and then be back in time for dinner.

But as one his grandmothers shook their heads, and Waipo explained. “We don’t know where the other pieces are. The idea was to hide them forever — no one person could know more than one location.”

Wei Wuxian refused to accept that. “There has to be something we can do! A-Ma, you can’t just die!”

“I’m hardly dying today, A-Xian.” As if to prove it, A-Ma reached up to pat his hair.

“We’re not giving up, A-Xian.” Waipo assured him.



But his grandmothers had lived for centuries without finding a solution. He could not stand by and assume they would now.

Wei Wuxian would find a way to free her from the Yin Iron. There was no alternative.

The truth behind the theft of the Yin Iron remained a mystery, though the thief continued to use it. And use it extensively, for Lan Yi felt each use in her bones. The village on the mountain simply had too few links to the outside world to gain news of its use. Births and marriage and successions were the only gossip of the cultivation world the villages of the valleys gave any note. For as yet, war had not stirred.

Yet Lan Yi's health continued its decline.

Baoshan Sanren took more frequent brief trips off the mountain. She brought back two more orphans, Yan'er's age, for no child should grow up without friends, and no more. These would be the students of her students, for Baoshan Sanren would not teach them personally. She would not take in another disciple until her wife was safe and the Yin Iron dealt with.

If it could be dealt with.

The centuries had offered no answers.

It took Wei Wuxian two months to break into the secret compartment behind the erotic novels shelf of the library, one year to work out the mistakes Xue Chonghai and Lan Yi had made in their attempts to control resentful energy, and another two years to solve the problem and build up the strength he needed to succeed.

Xiao Xingchen went down the mountain at his first opportunity, in the winter of Wei Wuxian's fifteenth year. He wanted to help, against the Yin Iron, but he also desired nothing more than to see the world. It was time for his path to diverge from that of Baoshan Sanren, and he knew it. Wei Wuxian could see the knowledge in his eyes.

Everyone knew it.

The eldest disciples, those who had stayed, or had a taste of the outside world and chose to return, to night-hunt only in the mountains and villages under Baoshan Sanren's protection, living just out of step with reality, loaded Xiao Xingchen down with goods, and bid their farewells. They did not resent him, but the other two disciples recruited with him did.

They had seen the world, and did not like what it had to offer, thought him a fool for believing it could be better.

Wei Wuxian understood, as did Baoshan Sanren herself. Before she retreated to her mountain, she had lived, and learned, and loved. It was only when Lan Yi bound herself to

the Yin Iron that she decided to build a sanctuary away from worldly concerns, where her wife could find the peace she needed for her fight.

She had built in the protections for a reason — only one who truly had need could find their way, and so no enemies would ever find her. A disciple who traveled the villages in the surrounding valleys and mountains for a night hunt or trip to the market could return when the task was accomplished, for that was within the sphere of her immortal influence. Yet the villagers of those same towns could only summon aid from the mountain if it was needed.

If the mountain had a name before her, it did no longer.

When a disciple left her protection, they could only return if they still needed her. If there was still something Baoshan Sanren could teach them, or a family member or lover back on the mountain, the token would produce a portal to bring them home.

Those cases were rare. It was rare for her disciples to fall in love with one another, and rarer still for a child to be born. It happened perhaps once or twice a century, necessitating her occasional trips to find new disciples. Xiao Xingchen, like Cangse Sanren before him, would not return. He would find his token nothing more than a piece of metal, except in the most dire of emergencies.

She recognized the look on her grandson's face as he waved to Xiao Xingchen's back until the portal snapped shut behind him.

It was wistful.

That night, she sat up with Wei Wuxian long after most of the village had gone to sleep. Lan Yi had been sleeping since mid-afternoon, as she did with increasing frequency.

She worked on a new coat to help with her wife's chills and watched him study. His hands, busy as usual, flashed through the knots of an elaborate necklace the headman of one of the nearby villages had commissioned for his daughter's wedding the last time Wei Wuxian visited the market, frowning at his notes all the while.

As the fire burned down to embers, she broke the silence. "You want to go down the mountain."

Wei Wuxian shrugged. "Someday. But not like Shixiong." Not like his mother.

"My filial boy. I don't want you to trap yourself here for us."

He frowned down at his notes, a project he was keeping a surprise, as he did most of his experiments. Only to dazzle his grandmothers and martial aunts and uncles with the results.

A bell on the rabbit pen matched with one outside the youngest disciples' door, so they would know when the rabbits needed to be rounded up or defended. A heating system for the garden, so they could have fresh vegetables year-round. A redesigned safety netting, so a fall would give a gentle bump back onto solid ground, rather than leave an unfortunate disciple staring down at the ground far below.

This, Baoshan Sanren suspected, was something far more dangerous.

“I’m not,” He set aside the knotting board to pick up his brush, and began to write like his words were the only force holding off an invading army.

When Wei Wuxian broke the news of his plan, his grandmothers wondered where he had learned to keep secrets so well. They had known he was up to something, but demonic cultivation? Cleansing the Burial Mounds? The mere discussion of involving himself with the Yin Iron was too much.

Wei Wuxian sat on the floor of his grandmothers’ house, though he’d had one of his own among the disciples since he hit puberty, to give them all privacy. He fiddled with the dizi A-Ma had given him when he first arrived, held just out of his grandmothers’ sight. A-Ma in bed, Waipo in a chair next to it. “We need to find the Yin Iron and hide it again. Or better, destroy it. I have — well, not a complete plan. But a plan to find out how it can be done.”

“No!” Baoshan Sanren’s gut reaction was instinctual.

He’d expected opposition, but not so early. “Waipo?”

“There’s nothing we can do. The Yin Iron is too dangerous to handle.” She insisted.

“What if it wasn’t?”

“That’s what your A-Ma thought, and look what happened to her.”

“Niangzi.” A-Ma sliced through the tension between them.

Wei Wuxian recovered first, while Waipo was busy trying to decide on an apology. “I mean, what if it wasn’t handled directly. You know I’ve been looking at A-Ma’s old writings on the Yin Iron and Xue Chonghai’s demonic cultivation and I think —”

“Absolutely not.”

“You didn’t let me finish.” This time, he pushed on without letting Waipo get a word in edgewise. It felt strange to do so, compared to their habitual back and forth debates. But he’d be celebrating his sixtieth birthday by the time he finished his explanation if she objected every other word. “I believe there’s a way to master resentment with music, if I start at the very beginning. Not trying to control the Yin Iron — I don’t think it *can* be controlled, at least not for very long — but resentful energy itself. Resentment may come from different sources — People, animals, land, emotions — but it all wants someone to listen in a language it can understand. Like inquiry taken to a new level. And where better to learn how than the deepest known wellspring of resentment?”

A-Ma considered him in silence, but Waipo snorted. “You want to what? Walk into the Burial Mounds? No one can survive that.”

“No one? Didn’t you?” Wei Wuxian had read A-Ma’s account of the event many times over, not discounting the original recounting. They hadn’t walked out as fierce corpses.

“You’re not us!” Waipo shouted.

“Wen Mao wasn’t immortal then either. Only almost. I can do this, Waipo.” He pleaded.

His parents had been far too mortal to survive. But he wasn’t. Not anymore.

A-Ma lay a hand on her wife’s arm, nodding to him in encouragement. “We should let him show us his plans, at least.”

“Lan Yi —”

Waipo began to protest, but was silenced by the slight incline of A-Ma’s brow. “I was snared by the Yin Iron, not resentful energy. Many a dabbler in demonic cultivation has returned to the orthodox path unscathed.”

“What he’s suggesting is more than *dabbling*.”

“What *I’m* suggesting could cleanse the Burial Mounds.” Wei Wuxian snapped.

He had never snapped at either of his grandmothers before.

For a long moment, he thought Waipo might storm out and refuse to hear him out.

But finally, she sat back, and opened her heart to listen.

Wei Wuxian opened his portal three months later. It was as long as he would agree to wait.

A-Ma had walked out on her own two legs to hug him, and now sat in a chair that had been moved outside for the occasion.

Waipo could barely stand to look at him.

“He’ll be back.” A-Ma said in her ear, just loud enough for him to overhear as his eldest shibo handed over a qiankun bag full of miscellaneous provisions.

“What if he isn’t?” Waipo whispered back, her voice breaking on the last word.

It had not occurred to him that she worried he might fail to return not because he had died, but because he didn’t need her enough. The disciples born there could always return. Wei Wuxian might not have been born in the village on the mountain, but his ties were just as strong.

Turning to his grandmothers, he bowed deep over his hands. “Disciples may outgrow their masters, but I will always need my grandmother.”

She softened — truly softened — for the first time since he had announced his plan, and held out her arms to him. “Oh, A-Xian, come here.”

“Waipo!” He cried, throwing his arms around her neck. If not for her immortality, Baoshan Sanren would have been bowled over.

All too soon, it was time to go.

Loaded down with enough provisions to last a lifetime, he stepped back into the world in the same place he had left it, by an old tree and a wall of darkness.

Wei Wuxian walked out of the Burial Mounds to find himself something of a local deity. He was a month away from his twentieth birthday, not quite an adult. He had gained knowledge and power beyond his greatest hopes and wildest dreams. Beyond his worst nightmares.

And there he ended his tale.

The ending was rather anticlimactic. There were no details of his time in the Burial Mounds, nor of experiences in Yiling or how Wei Wuxian had known of Muxi Mountain. Instead, he sat in silence.

It took Lan Wangji an embarrassingly long time to realize Wei Wuxian was waiting for questions.

Jin Zixuan got there first. “What about Wen Qing? If you’re not allied with Wen Ruohan, how did she come to defect?”

“I was sent to Yiling by Wen Ruohan to learn whether the Yiling Laozu was a threat to him about three years ago.” Wen Qing plucked the empty teacup from Luo Qingyang’s fingers and turned to the teapot, continuing with her back to them. “He... pretended to be someone else, and when I was frustrated that I couldn’t find the Yiling Laozu, we got drunk together. He told me he was worried about his ill grandmother —”

“Which was true!” Wei Wuxian pointed out. She glared at him, and continued as though he had not spoken.

“— and I confided my worries for my family’s safety. When we sobered up, he revealed himself and offered me a deal. I was balancing Wen Ruohan’s qi for him after his uses of the Yin Iron, so I was in a unique position to find out what he knew. He brought my family here, and I returned Qishan with lies. Unfortunately, by the time I learned the other pieces’ locations, Wen Chao and Xue Yang had already found them.”

“I was able to get Chang Liyan’s piece back from Xue Yang, and of course the sword from the Xuanwu of Slaughter, but...” Wei Wuxian shrugged.

From Xue Yang.

Lan Wangji, too, had been on a quest to find the Yin Iron. He had thought he was meant to bring the pieces back to the Cloud Recesses, but perhaps Lan Yi had sent him on a path meant to bring him to her grandson.

They had come close to meeting, he realized now, narrowly missed the chance to bring another piece into Wei Wuxian's keeping.

During his search for the Yin Iron, Lan Wangji had reached one site after another too late. An abandoned village with a statue that came to life and attacked him, a garden turned to dust and gravel, and worst of all, a courtyard full of corpses.

In the courtyard of the Chang clan — the massacred descendants of his ancestor's friend, he realized now — Lan Wangji had knelt in blood-soaked dirt to play inquiry for the spirits there.

The Chang Clan had employed four servants, non-cultivators whose ghosts lingered more out of shock than out of desire for revenge. There was far less resentment in the courtyard than he would have expected after such a massacre, even when the majority of the victims were cultivators.

The ghosts spoke over each other to answer his questions, confusing the chords on into an incomprehensible racket until Lan Wangji dampened them with his hands. *One at a time please*, he'd plucked out, and then the story began to unfold.

Their answers were still a jumble, awash with fear from the horror of their murder, and watching their bodies torture and slay cultivator after cultivator. Their murderer was Xue Yang, he learned, as he had been called by the man wreathed in smoke who took his life in turn. The man had one companion, or three, the ghosts did not recall, for only the man had spoken to them as if they were among the living.

Lan Wangji had dismissed that claim as exaggeration at the time.

With eyes glowing red, the man spotted Xue Yang despite his initial attempt at concealment. "How does one so young have so very many ghosts following him? Perhaps I should let them have you," he had said. All the ghosts agreed.

For that was precisely what he did in the end.

When Xue Yang lay sightless on the ground, and a hidden possession hidden away in a bag that drowned out its sinister voices, the man had offered to bring someone to handle their burial. But no, the ghosts had said, the townspeople would never dare to enter the Chang Clan's house now. Qinghe Nie would already have been summoned.

After paying his final respects, the man departed.

*Which body was Xue Yang?* Lan Wangji asked, in the hope the man's body might offer up clues and prevent the complete failure of his quest. But the patch of dirt the ghosts indicated lay empty.

A trail of bloody footsteps meandered to the gates, and there the trail ended.

With no trail left to follow, Lan Wangji played the servants to rest, and returned home to an ambush.

In the moment, Lan Wangji had been revolted by the story the ghosts told, and an echo of that sickness turned his stomach now.

Yet now his mind placed Wei Wuxian in the story, dressed in robes that accentuated the breadth of his shoulders, his outer robe flowing behind him and eyes glowing red as he gave the ghosts the power to take revenge with only a few sharp notes on his dizi. And Lan Wangji shivered for an entirely different reason, swallowing a sudden excess of saliva.

Wei Wuxian looked back at him in question, and a shock of heat ran through him.

“The other pieces,” He said, to distract himself. “How do you plan to collect them?”

Wei Wuxian winced. “I need to get to Wen Ruohan, but getting close is... tricky. He has the Core-Melting Hand at his side, and thousands of puppets. Attempting to combat him alone would be suicide, even if I used the Yin Iron, which —”

“—Which he will not be doing.” Baoshan Sanren finished firmly.

“Absolutely not.” Wen Qing added.

“We don’t need to have to untangle you from it as well, A-Xian.” Lan Yi extracted a hand from her cocoon to lay it on Wei Wuxian’s arm.

“I’m not planning to! I know better.” Wei Wuxian gestured helplessly around himself, asking Lan Wangji for sympathy with a pout.

“What if you had an army behind you?” Luo Qingyang asked. “Would you be able to get close enough then?”

Wei Wuxian narrowed his eyes at her. “You’ve been plotting how to ask me this, haven’t you?”

“We want to ask for your aid, yes.” Lan Wangji added, far more diplomatically.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, shaking his head. “I wondered why you hadn’t asked already honestly.”

“It seemed impolite to ask while we were already benefiting from your hospitality.” Lan Wangji realized how ridiculous that sounded as soon as the words left his mouth. There was a war. Of course it was natural to inquire whether the Yiling Laozu might consider lending his aid.

The truth was Lan Wangji had not wanted to break the peaceful illusion. While people were out in the world, dying and corrupted at the hands of Wen Ruohan’s soldiers and puppets.

I was already planning to join the Sunshot Campaign. I thought I could bring the three of you back as a gesture of goodwill.” Wei Wuxian hurried to add, “Not that I wouldn’t have helped you anyway,” while looking directly at Lan Wangji.

He assumed the reassurance was meant for him. It was unnecessary. “I know.”

Those simple words earned him a blinding smile. “And then I’ll offer to purify the Yin Iron for them.”

“Which you know how to do.” Luo Qingyang said, doubt in her voice.

Of course Wei Wuxian knew the solution, Lan Wangji wanted to say, if anyone could purify the Yin Iron it was him. He was the impossible made real.

“... Mostly?” Wei Wuxian rubbed the back of his neck as he trailed off. “There’s one, maybe two teeny tiny details I’m still working out. But I can put it in stasis while we work it out.”

Wen Qing sighed loudly.

“Does Lan Yi-qianbei have that kind of time?” Luo Qingyang asked.

It was not an unfair question. Though her hair had been black when he met her in the Cold Pond Cave, and streaked with white when he first met her a little over a month earlier, black strands were now a minority in a brittle white sea. From this distance, he could see the paper-thin texture of her unnaturally pale skin, pulled tight against her bones, veins threaded with black in stark contrast. Bruises burst across the skin of her forearm, and there were no doubt more hidden from site.

It was similar to Jin Zixuan’s initial condition, only a thousand times worse.

“We will also place me in stasis.” Lan Yi replied almost casually.

Wei Wuxian made a wounded sound. “A-Ma.”

“We’ve talked about this A-Xian. It’s time.” Lan Yi said, as firmly as a sudden scratchiness in her voice would allow. Her wife held her teacup up so she could take a sip, but as she tried to swallow, a wracking cough sprayed the droplets back out.

The world seemed to hold its breath until it passed.

Baoshan Sanren held the cup up for her again, murmuring soothing words too low for Lan Wangji to overhear, and this time, it stayed down. Wen Qing pulled out several sachets of herbs, and began mixing a concoction with the remainder of the tea.

Wei Wuxian squeezed his eyes shut as though he was the one in pain, fists clenching on his thighs, only to open them a moment later and force a smile. “Anyway, that’s the plan!”

Everyone chose to pretend he was not on the verge of tears.

Lan Wangji tried to focus on Wei Wuxian’s well-intentioned but naïve plan. “The problem would be persuading the sect leaders to give it to you. My brother and Nie Mingjue will want to destroy it immediately.”

“I warned him of that, but I’m a doctor, not a politician. I didn’t know what to offer as collateral.” Wen Qing leaned over Wei Wuxian to hand Baoshan Sanren the medicinal concoction, an easy intimacy that seemed to spark a light in his mind. And *I want that*,



though he had flinched from touch outside of combat for most of his life, and only a short time earlier he had been frustrated and confused by the magnitude of Wei Wuxian's secrets.

But he had been certain Wei Wuxian had been keeping his ancestor from him for a reason — and how would Lan Wangji have reacted to that story before he knew anything of Wei Wuxian as a person? Saving his life had been a start, but the way Wei Wuxian treated him, made him feel like he deserved every indulgence, thawed the distant icy reaches of his heart with every smile had made all the difference.

There was so much he still did not know, that had been deliberately left out of the story.

Lan Wangji looked down at the tassel hanging from his belt, feeling the bumps of the knot Wei Wuxian had made for him even before they properly met.

Wei Wuxian could keep his remaining secrets a while longer.

“My father will want it for himself.” Jin Zixuan added without expression. “He will never believe you want to purify the Yin Iron. *I* barely believe it.” That, he admitted through clenched teeth. “Everyone already thinks you’re just waiting to see who wins before you march in with an army and take on whoever’s left. I guarantee it.”

“Do you have an alternative suggestion?” Wei Wuxian asked.

Surprisingly, from what Lan Wangji knew of him, Jin Zixuan not only had a suggestion, but volunteered it.

“You need to ask for something — something my father understands. He understands three things: money, power, and...” He made a face.

“Sex?” Wei Wuxian arched a brow, his voice low and teasing,

“Yes, that.” Jin Zixuan flushed as scarlet as Lan Wangji's ears must be.

Simply from the mention of a natural human activity. The image in the book Wei Wuxian had shown him flashed through his mind. He wondered if Wei Wuxian was experienced. He must have had plenty of opportunity in Yiling, as the town's savior, benefactor, and most beautiful person all rolled into one.

Did he know how to do the things of which Lan Wangji had only heard whispers?

These thoughts were entirely inappropriate. He wrenched his attention back to the matter at hand, as Wei Wuxian laughed.

“I see you didn't inherit that trait.”

“No, Zixuan's his own brand of dumbass.” Luo Qingyang agreed.

Jin Zixuan's sigh turned to a pained groan as he jostled his ribs. “I deserved that.”

“So... gold?” Wei Wuxian asked. “But I don’t need gold. Yiling’s doing well, these days, and they keep giving me money even when I haven’t done anything.”

It seemed Wei Wuxian was unfamiliar with the concept of taxes.

Jin Zixuan shook his head without lifting it from the litter, ridiculous even as he spouted sense for the first time since Lan Wangji had known him. Perhaps ever. “You need legitimacy.”

Wei Wuxian screwed up his face in confusion. “As what?”

“As a sect leader.” Jin Zixuan added.

“But I don’t want to found a sect.” He sounded like the lost little boy he once had been.

Wen Qing elbowed him. “Do you want to purify the Yin Iron and save your grandmother?”

He rubbed his nose and sighed. “I suppose I could pretend to found a sect.”

Jin Zixuan opened his mouth to argue, until Luo Qingyang shook her head at him. He closed it, reconsidered for a moment, and said, “You should ask for a marriage alliance.”

Lan Wangji’s breath caught in his throat.

“Marriage?” Wei Wuxian’s eyes nearly jumped from his head.

“A marriage alliance will affirm your desire to integrate into the cultivation world. It would soothe fears of you turning around and invading.” Jin Zixuan explained.

“I suppose that makes sense,” Wei Wuxian said reluctantly, grimacing all the while. “I never thought I’d marry a stranger. Or anyone at all, really.”

Lan Wangji narrowly stopped himself from interrupting to ask why not. Was he uninterested? Surely he must have received proposals.

“That’s politics.” Jin Zixuan said. “Your options would be limited, though. You can’t have my betrothed, and —”

Luo Qingyang snorted. “Oh, can’t he?”

“Mianmian.” Jin Zixuan whined, though Lan Wangji did not understand why. He had put up such a fuss over his betrothal during the lectures that even Lan Wangji had been forced to pay attention.

It was not fair of him to force someone else into his own situation, and take away the only reasonable option.

Or *was* Jiang Yanli the only reasonable option? Wei Wuxian had shown indications that he was not only attracted to women.

“This is all so much more complicated than in my day.” Baoshan Sanren shook her head.  
“Sects leaders acting like kings and emperors.”

“What has the world come to?” Lan Yi teased her.

“You jest, but yes.” Baoshan Sanren fed her wife more medicine.

Wei Wuxian did not want to marry a stranger.

The image of Wei Wuxian dressed in red and gold as he bowed to a faceless cultivator flashed through Lan Wangji’s mind, and he heard his own voice before conscious thought caught up.

“Me.”

Lan Wangji could scarcely breathe as the weight of the room’s focus fell on him.

“W-what?” Wei Wuxian stuttered. “Lan Zh — Lan Wangji. What did you just say?”

He breathed in, out. In, out. All the while Wei Wuxian looked nowhere but his eyes. The weight of his focus pinned him in place as though he were bound there. He breathed in — and impulse won a second time.

“Marry me. You should ask — no, demand, to marry me.”

## Chapter End Notes

There will be more info on what Wei Wuxian did in the Burial Mounds eventually, and on his friendship with Wen Qing, but I thought that's enough flashbacks for now, on with the plot!

[Chapter Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 6

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** nothing not covered by the tags, I think!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian grabbed Lan Wangji by the arm and dragged him to his feet, pulling him out of his grandmothers' house. He didn't think. Couldn't think. All he knew was that he needed to get him out, away from whatever that hard-headed Jin boy had said to make him think he had to do this, and set him straight.

They did not make it far from the door before Lan Wangji dug his heels in. "Wei Wuxian —"

He blinked, looked down at his hand around Lan Wangji's wrist, and dropped it, his palm red-hot like he'd scalded it on the stove. He had invaded his boundaries too much already. "We need to talk. Privately."

Lan Wangji looked down at his wrist, rubbing it with this other hand, and nodded. Reluctant.

Wei Wuxian ached to sooth him, but his touch would not be welcome now. At least now Lan Wangji might understand why this was a terrible idea.

He didn't want to enter an arranged marriage with anyone, but especially Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji was — was —

Lan Wangji was more important than he knew.

Lan Wangji was everything.

Wei Wuxian could not let him sacrifice his future out of that sense of duty and honor the Lans instilled with their wall of endless rules.

He led him down the mountain to the rabbit pen.

It was a good choice for this conversation. Lan Wangji softened and calmed with a rabbit in his lap, several more flopping onto the ground around him. Wei Wuxian wanted to paint him. It wasn't usually his preferred craft, requiring more concentration than letting his hands weave and pull as they pleased but — he always wanted to paint him.

None of the rabbits came to Wei Wuxian. Either because they had good taste, and preferred Lan Zhan, or because they sensed his mood. And knew Wei Wuxian would squeeze anything he got his hands on for stress relief. He settled for the tassel hanging from his belt. "I can't marry you this way."

Lan Wangji's expression crumpled, and Wei Wuxian feared he might start crying. But he swallowed heavily and looked up, the soothing motion of his hand over the large white rabbit's ears never ceasing. "What do you mean?"

"I can't use you as a bartering tool. I *like* you." And it would be far too difficult to give him up.

He'd thought, perhaps, when this was all over, if Lan Wangji was still speaking to him, they could be friends. And maybe, one day, friendship would blossom into love. Lan Zhan made him want to gather wildflowers and weave them into a crown for him as they played with the children, spend their evenings together as Wei Wuxian rambled on and on, and Lan Wangji felt comfortable to speak when he wished.

He wanted him willing on his knees, taking everything Wei Wuxian chose to give him, and begging for more. Wei Wuxian was not ashamed of his desires, though he would certainly not express them after the way Lan Wangji reacted to the tamest of illustrations. Not even to scare him off; he would not be cruel.

And Lan Wangji might think he could love the man he saw. But he did not truly know him.

He had been more accepting of demonic cultivation and portals to nowhere than Wei Wuxian could ever have expected. But if Lan Zhan knew everything he had done and had not told him —

Lan Zhan would be right to run.

He wanted time, to find a way for them to fit together, if that was something he could have. Time to learn if this was what the beginnings of romantic love felt like, time where Lan Wangji might fall for him in return.

Not an arranged marriage when everything was wrong in the world, and his grandmother's life hung in the balance.

This was not the right time to imagine kiss-bitten lips and glazed eyes, silky hair mussed from his attentions.

Lan Wangji frowned at his words. "If you would prefer a stranger to me —"

Though he was trying to convince him *not* to shackle himself to the Yiling Laozu so casually, Wei Wuxian could not let him believe that. "No! I — Lan Zhan you're — Lan Wangji, you have to know how beautiful you are."

The way his ears flushed was so adorable. Even now, the urge to bite them rose in his throat.

But Lan Wangji looked down at his lap. "I have been told. The words 'ice sculpture' and 'jade statue' have been used."

"Lan Wangji! You're anything but ice. You're not stone. You're smiling at a rabbit in your lap even though it's tracked mud and grass all over your pretty white robes. You're flesh and

blood and perfectly imperfect.” He was revealing too much of himself, but Wei Wuxian could not bring himself to care.

“I’m not.”

“Hmm? What’s this then?” Wei Wuxian reached out and pressed his finger into the soft flesh of Lan Wangji’s cheek, ignoring the thrill that went through him as Lan Wangji finally looked at him in favor of admiring his pout.

“Not smiling.” Lan Wangji corrected. “Obviously I am human.”

“A funny, brilliant, and infuriatingly stubborn human.” He teased. “Anyone would be lucky to marry you.”

Lan Wangji frowned. “If you do not find me an unacceptable match, then why?”

“You deserve better than a sham of a betrothal that will be broken in a few months anyway.” Better than a battlefield demand for his hand, only for the contract to be broken as soon as the Yin Iron was purified. Better for a stranger to hate and avoid him than to break his own heart. “If I take you back and then ask for you — if what Mianmian and the annoying one said about Jin-zongzhu is true, what liberties will they assume I’ve taken with you?”

The lines around Lan Wangji’s mouth deepened. “The match cannot be broken.”

“What do you mean?”

“It will have to be a genuine marriage.” He clarified, and Wei Wuxian’s heart lurched. “By entering the war, you will have entered the cultivation world. If you broke the engagement, even after purifying the Yin Iron, the sects would take it as a declaration of war. Even so, they would have come for Yiling eventually. ”

“And I can’t bundle up the whole of Yiling and bring the people here. I have to play by their rules.” He hadn’t asked for the responsibility of a lord, and he wanted that of a sect leader even less. But it seemed he had no choice. Lan Wangji, however, did. “But you don’t. Don’t do this for me.”

“Is Yiling a terrible place? Would it be such a sacrifice to marry a — to marry a friend?”

Oh. It was difficult to keep arguing when Lan Wangji looked at him like *that*. Like a warm cup of tea on a winter’s day.

“No. Not anymore, at any rate.” It was unrecognizable, from the vague memories of his childhood. “I don’t have a sect residence. The Burial Mounds are just rocks and dead trees and newly sprouted foliage.”

“I am not afraid of a little dirt.” Lan Wangji insisted.

“You’ll have to nag me to do my duties as Sect Leader. All I’ll want to do is night hunt and teach any disciples who have the bad taste to study with me to shoot down kites.” His heart beat faster and faster with each refusal to not marry him.

“Wen Qing will ensure you do your duties.” He countered. “I would consider it an honor to spend my life night hunting with you.”

So would he. Night hunting with Lan Wangji sounded like every dream of his future he’d had as a child.

The only excuse that remained was that Wei Wuxian would outlive him, and that excuse would not hold water. Because Wei Wuxian was still a step away from immortality, and Lan Wangji might very well become an immortal himself.

And he did not have to make it Lan Zhan’s problem that he wanted more. He could hold his feelings close to his heart and ensure his betrothed had everything he could want. He could.

He would try not to hope that Lan Wangji would ever return his feelings.

“Then I believe we have an announcement to make.” Wei Wuxian bounced to his feet, holding out his hand.

Lan Wangji did not take it, looking down mournfully at the sleeping rabbit in his lap.

Chuckling fondly under his breath, Wei Wuxian shook his head. “You can bring the bunny.”

Lan Wangji cradled the rabbit in his arms so gently it did not even shift in its sleep and very carefully climbed to his feet.

He couldn’t believe he got to marry this man. Even if it wasn’t a real marriage.

Not yet, and perhaps not ever.

### *Six Weeks Later*

Lan Wangji was not usually expected to make introductions. Social niceties were not his strong suit.

As the Yiling Laozu’s betrothed, it was only to be expected that he would handle the introductions. He hated every moment of it.

Despite the dire situation, the war camp of the Sunshot Campaign was a hotbed for gossip, the war treated like a discussion conference between battles. There was little else to keep up morale, when venturing too close to the medical tents meant the moans of their resentment-infected comrades in arms, and the reminder of their likely fate.

Wen Qing had already stormed off to the medical tents, and Lan Wangji had no doubt they would be fully under her control by sundown.

Cultivators and camp followers gaped at the Yiling Laozu and his betrothed. He was a legend brought to life, come to save them. News had spread as rapidly as sound could carry it of what he wanted in return. Wei Wuxian’s title was on everyone’s lips. Even as they greeted his

arrival with relief, a sign that Wen Ruohan's defeat was imminent, they whispered of imagined atrocities.

The sect leaders were the worst of the lot. One by one, the sect leaders tracked them down as Wei Wuxian dragged him around to learn the workings of camp, evaluating his betrothed like a pig before the slaughter while expressing their gratitude. Every evaluating once over, every snide side-eye made Lan Wangji want to push a sect leader off the side of a small ravine.

He did not cause a diplomatic incident. But it was tempting.

Especially when Jin Guangshan offered *his* betrothed his choice of concubines right in front of Lan Wangji in exchange for instructions on his teleportation technique.

"What would I do with a concubine? I haven't even tasted the joys of marriage yet." Wei Wuxian slung an arm around his waist, pulling him closer. Lan Wangji was not sure how to tell him he could taste the joys of marriage whenever he wanted — so long as it was *only* Lan Wangji he tasted. "Besides, that technique depends on resentment, you orthodox cultivators could never condone it. But perhaps your son has picked up some tricks in his time with me?"

Jin Zixuan had not, his prolonged recovery preventing him from taking advantage of the library as Lan Wangji and Mianmian had — but they all agreed it was best not to attract Jin Guangshan's attention to Mianmian. Now that Jin Zixuan could finally walk again, Mianmian was teaching him, and he would show Jin Guangshan if asked. None of them would satisfy his thirst for power, but they were a show of cooperation. Precise techniques for a quick beheading from Baoshan Sanren and a fast-acting super hot fire talisman to take out the infectious puppets.

Mianmian would teach others as well, as Lan Wangji would share Lan Yi's lost techniques with the other Lan. And perhaps they might see fewer casualties with each battle.

"That is very generous," Jin Guangshan said blandly, and turned to go, though Lan Wangji knew this was only his first attempt.

Wei Wuxian let go of his waist, and grabbed his forearm, dragging Lan Wangji over to watch some camp followers replace the axle on a cart. Despite their apprehension, Wei Wuxian was able to draw them into a conversation on how long it took to break camp. Useful information, but Lan Wangji heard none of it, his focus narrowed on the patch of skin around which Wei Wuxian's fingers curled.

An anchor on which he might drift freely, if only he knew what to ask for. A tighter grip might be a good place to start.

The sect leader Lan Wangji had least expected to seek them out approached. Jiang Wanyin was dogged by an air of disbelief, stretching his limits to fill his new position. At least he had his sister's support to guide him. She looked even more exhausted than he did, though she did not carry a sword.



Jiang Wanyin bowed to Wei Wuxian with the minimum acceptable level of respect, and addressed Lan Wangji. “I did come back for you, you know.”

He inclined his head in acknowledgment. “You are an honorable man, I am aware.”

Neither of them knew how to continue the conversation.

Fortunately, his betrothed stepped in before Jiang Wanyin decided to simply walk away.

“Jiang-zongzhu, Jiang-guniang, I’m sorry to hear of your loss.”

“Thank you,” Jiang Yanli said, gracious, though a vein ticked in her brother’s jaw. “And I hope your choice of betrothed does not benefit me at Hanguang-jun’s detriment.”

“I never intended to ask for your hand, Jiang-guniang. The truth is Lan Zhan here swept me off my feet.” Their fingers twined together, and Lan Wangji swayed, ever so slightly into his side. “I could only have chosen him.”

“Swept you off your feet.” Jiang Wanyin muttered under his breath, earning an elbow in the side from his sister.

“Congratulations, then, we will keep it a secret,” she said. “We should thank you. Wen Qing has already made a difference in our ability to treat the injured and infected cultivators.”

“Are you a doctor yourself, Jiang-guniang?” Wei Wuxian asked. Lan Wangji was so happy to be marrying someone who could handle obligatory social conversations without expecting him to contribute.

“No, I merely help out,” She said.

Jiang Wanyin scoffed. “A-Jie’s taken it onto herself to supervise the running of the camp. No one else was handling it.”

“A-Cheng. I simply coordinated the activities of various groups.” Jiang Yanli, he suspected, was far too modest, even if Jiang Wanyin exaggerated out of pride on her behalf.

“You also work with the healers. And cooks. And now we can actually move the camp when we’re attacked.” Jiang Wanyin said flatly.

“Oh, you’re the boss lady those guys were telling me about!” Wei Wuxian was delighted to learn this, which Lan Wangji assumed had been included in the conversation he missed while thinking about his betrothed’s hands.

Jiang Yanli pushed her hair behind her ear. “Let me know if there is anything you need. But please excuse me, I need to help with dinner.”

“Jin Zixuan doesn’t deserve her.” Wei Wuxian whispered conspiratorially to Jiang Wanyin, though still loud enough for the woman in question to overhear.

“You’re telling me.” Jiang Wanyin was delighted to have found an ally. Jiang Yanli shook her head at him as she departed, indulgently fond. “She’s the only reason I’m still here. When our

parents died, I would have gone back for them, tried to fight Wen Zhuliu and his entire army, but A-Jie convinced me we had to go straight to Meishan. I thought I was protecting her, but we just managed to find our cousins before Wen soldiers caught up, so of course she was right all along.”

“She seems like a wise woman.” Wei Wuxian said.

“She is. We didn’t manage to convince our grandmother to join the Sunshot Campaign, but she sent some of her disciples under my command. We can take Wen Zhuliu, if you can solve the puppet problem.”

“You should not attempt to fight Wen Zhuliu yourself.” Lan Wangji said, making Jiang Wanyin bristle. “Not alone,” He added, so as not to be challenged to a duel. But the Core Melting Hand was too dangerous to fight in close range.

“I wasn’t planning on it.” Jiang Wanyin replied. “I’m still not sure we won’t end up overrun with corpses while you laugh if we win this war, but he sure seems to believe in you.”

Wei Wuxian shrugged, and produced his dizi with a dramatic flourish of resentful energy that Lan Wangji knew from experience was unnecessary.

Jiang Wanyin flinched, but did not run. “You know, I do remember what my father saw in Yiling, besides those corpses you’re so fond of. If you want this marriage to look like a political move, you should stop holding hands.” He gestured at their joined hands with his chin.

Wei Wuxian dropped his hand like a hot coal.

Wei Wuxian took him to Yiling several times while Jin Zixuan completed his recuperation, and introduced him as his betrothed. The town had been more than he could have hoped for. Though it did have more than its fair share of fierce corpses, in that the number of fierce corpses was greater than zero.

Even the corpses were full of life. A young woman who had died in an accident and wanted the chance to live served them tea, and went home to her parents with the man courting her. A carpenter who had yet to craft the perfect masterpiece when he died offered to build them a marriage bed fit for an emperor, free of charge.

They were just... people. People who, for reasons of their own, wanted to stay, and had the Yiling Laozu to make that happen. Like Wen-popo.

In the shops, and in the teahouse where they heard news of the Sunshot Campaign, Lan Wangji was treated with curiosity, and a warmth he had not experienced even on his visits to Caiyi Town. His reticence was treated as shyness, not arrogance, and he was permitted to sit quietly when he did not have the words to join in, but still felt welcomed wherever Wei Wuxian took him.

Despite the group of young townspeople who giggled and pouted at his betrothed — *his* betrothed — and whined about his new unavailability.

Wei Wuxian was friendly with them, but not overly so. Even so, he had to stamp down the urge to start biting when one girl leaned over to inspect the knotted tassel at his waist, and showed off a pair of clover-leaf knot earrings made by Wei Wuxian. Lan Wangji had thought he broke his biting habit at seven years old.

“Her earrings...” He asked, when they were alone.

Fortunately, Wei Wuxian did not seem to pick up on his irrational jealousy. “I give some out because they keep giving me money.”

“Taxes should be used for the maintenance of the city.” Lan Wangji informed him in case he did not know.

“They give me too much for that. I hired someone to do the math for me, and even after I made sure everyone had food and housing, it was too much.” He seemed ill at ease, but Lan Wangji wondered if it was enough to fund the construction of a suitable starter sect residence.

“You brought them prosperity and safety. They want to repay it, in some small way,” he said. “That group seemed disappointed, that you are betrothed to me. Did you ever...?”

He would not be jealous if Wei Wuxian had kissed one of them. Or more. He wouldn’t.

“I flirted, but I was never going to do anything, and they knew it.” He shrugged, and Lan Wangji breathed an internal sigh of relief. “I don’t really have a preference, for gender, but they see me as some kind of savior. It always made me kind of uncomfortable.”

Lan Wangji was certain they would not have been quite so enthusiastic if Wei Wuxian were a less attractive savior. But he was not going to say so. “Please consider me your shield from further advances.”

Wei Wuxian laughed, and promised he would.

The second-most worrying introduction was Nie Mingjue, who had known him since childhood, and had the straightforward honesty and volume of a parrot. It would not be reasonable to clarify the situation, and expect Nie Mingjue to continue to act like he despised the Yiling Laozu. Nie Mingjue despised deceit.

Yet he knew Lan Wangji, and he was not a capable actor himself. He had already given himself away to Jiang Wanyin, who was no better at socialization than himself. Lan Wangji decided he would simply say as little as possible.

A bird took off from Meng Yao’s arm, and flew up into the sky. He unrolled a scrap of paper, frowning down at it, only to quickly stow it away in his sleeve upon noticing their approach.

“Nie-zongzhu,” He bowed as Wei Wuxian did the same. “May I introduce my betrothed, the Yiling Laozu?”

Nie Mingjue ignored his statement completely. “Your brother was looking for you after the meeting. He got caught up in an urgent scout debrief, but you should go find him.”

“I will.” That was the most worrying introduction, but he looked forward to a more extensive reunion than the brief hug earlier.

Then and only then, having secured his promise, did Nie Mingjue turn his attention to his betrothed. “You brought Wangji here in a cloud of resentment. And demanded he marry you.”

“I sense quite a bit of resentment coming from that sword of yours.” Wei Wuxian said, with an exaggerated smirk that nevertheless tied Lan Wangji’s insides in knots. “Why did no one tell me the Nie bound animal spirits to their sabers?”

Nie Mingjue bristled.

Meng Yao gave Wei Wuxian a more thorough appraisal. Less inclined, perhaps, to believe rumor due to his own treatment for nothing more than his illegitimate status. “You remind me of Nie-zongzhu’s little brother.”

“No, Huaisang’s more annoying.” Nie Mingjue said. “But at least *he* doesn’t raise the dead. I raised him right.”

“I appreciate your honesty, Nie-zongzhu.” Wei Wuxian bowed, though the insult to his grandmothers must have stung.

As they walked away, he heard Nie Mingjue grumbling, “Meng Yao, how many times do I have to tell you to call me Dage?”

Baoshan Sanren waited in the Burial Mounds, maintaining the array that kept the Yin Iron suppressed and Lan Yi alive.

Only days before joining the Sunshot Campaign, they had stepped from the mountain directly into the Burial Mounds. Dead trees were scattered across the landscape, uprooted and in varying states of calcification unnatural to these parts. But there were also living ones, old and slowly recovering from ages of deprivation, or young and flourishing. The undergrowth, too, had sprung back in the years since the Yiling Laozu had first arrived.

Wei Wuxian led the way to a cave, with the words Demon-Slaughtering Cave written on an old sign above it. He did not even make a joke about the name, occupied with supporting Lan Yi so she could walk to her place of rest, however temporary, on her own two feet.

Unnecessary for the ritual, and wanting to respect the family’s privacy, Mianmian and Jin Zixuan waited outside. Lan Wangji held back with them as the others entered, only for Lan Yi to turn, and insist she wanted him there. He followed, stopping just outside an array Wei Wuxian had already prepared.

The two pieces of Yin Iron he placed in two other circles, separate but linked to Lan Yi's by lines drawn in blood from the nearby pool.

When it was time, Lan Yi stroked her grandson's cheek, kissed her wife, and lay back with her arms over her chest in the proper Lan sleeping position.

And as Wen Qing undertook several final medical checks, Wei Wuxian unconsciously reached for his hand, squeezing hard enough to hurt. Lan Wangji squeezed back, providing what comfort he could.

He admired Lan Yi, he always had, absorbing every detail of a woman who had exemplified and yet defied everything it meant to be a Lan. Even when he still thought that if he followed the disciplines to the letter, he would eventually know what it meant to be happy. He admired her more now that he knew how she had erred, and sought to correct those errors at great cost to herself, yet stole happiness where she could. More content with herself than any other Lan he had ever met.

But he had grown up admiring her from afar, not listening to stories at her knee. If he could provide Wei Wuxian some level of comfort, he would.

The array flared up around Lan Yi's prone form, a golden shield of light obscuring her from view. The two pieces of Yin Iron were dark voids within their own shields, but the shields held, and Baoshan Sanren would remain to ensure it.

And with that, it was time to return to the world. To join the war, and return Lan Wangji to his brother.

Xiongzhong ran to him, when he found them.

"Wangji, I'm so, so relieved that you're safe." Xiongzhong crossed their usual boundaries to pull him into a hug. Lan Wangji was not quite certain how to reciprocate, his hands coming up to pat Xiongzhong awkwardly on the back, but he was glad he did. They both needed the assurance that this was real. That they were alive, and together, and there was hope.

"You as well. What happened?" Lan Wangji had been gone longer, but Xiongzhong went missing first.

"Dage sent his deputy Meng Yao out to search for me, when he heard I was missing, because he thought Meng Yao would be more capable of discretion than most cultivators. He was right. Meng Yao found me collapsed on a river bank, treated my wounds, and helped me get back to the Unclean Realm." He summarized, and immediately resumed his worry. "And you, Wangji? You were taken from that cave —"

"Laozu saved our lives. The Xuanwu of Slaughter was in the cave, and we were all injured, Jin Zixuan worst of all." Jin Zixuan still had a limp that might hinder him in battle, but they had waited too long already.

“He couldn’t even let us know you were alive?” Xiongzhong demanded.

“Would you have taken it as anything other than a ransom, Xiongzhong?”

“Isn’t it one?” There was an element of hysteria he had never heard from Xiongzhong before.

Lan Wangji was torn between the necessity of Xiongzhong’s ignorance, and the desire for his brother to like his betrothed. “Please allow me to introduce you under less extreme circumstances.”

He looked for Wei Wuxian, but he had left his side. Where...?

“He’s a demonic cultivator!”

“He is my betrothed, and he saved my life.” Lan Wangji scanned the area around him, and it did not take long to find him. He groaned internally. That would not be easy to explain away.

“Is that why you...?”

Wei Wuxian was talking to several women, cracking a joke and winking as he often did, and the women giggled in response. Their laughs did not make a sound.

Xiongzhong grabbed Shuoyue’s hilt. Lan Wangji reached out to stop him. It was strange, to be the one keeping Xiongzhong from ill-advised violence. But all Xiongzhong knew of Wei Wuxian was that he cultivated an unorthodox path and intended to take away his brother, and the ghosts were not helping.

Lan Wangji needed to make it clear that he wanted this union — had never anticipated anything with greater enthusiasm in his life, even the day he received his sword — but it was a daunting task. Every use of Wei Wuxian’s power would make it more difficult, and his power was necessary to win the war.

Beyond that, it was part of him wielded as easily as breathing. He would not ask Wei Wuxian to hide what he was. The world would simply have to adapt around him.

“We need him to win the war.” Lan Wangji said, and it was the correct tactic. The tension went out of Xiongzhong, and Lan Wangji relaxed.

“I heard there was a girl in the cave.” Xiongzhong said out of nowhere.

“...Mianmian?”

“Mianmian. So it is true.” Xiongzhong repeated under his breath, coming to a conclusion Lan Wangji could not guess at. “I’ll try to find a way to get you out of this.”

What did Mianmian have to do with anything?

“Please do not.” He said, though Xiongzhong was no longer listening.

Wei Wuxian had put on a show to ensure Jin Guangshan saw exactly what he expected of the Yiling Laozu. So of course Xiongzhong did not believe that his little brother had not been coerced. The Lan Wangji who had set out from the Cloud Recesses months earlier would have believed the same, at least until Wei Wuxian smiled at him and handed him a rabbit with properly supported hindquarters.

Still, perhaps he should wait until there were no ghosts or fierce corpses in sight to attempt a proper introduction. Wei Wuxian noticed them staring, and made a shooing gesture with his hand. Giving him privacy in his reunion.

He had done exactly the wrong thing for the sweetest of reasons. Lan Wangji's heart melted a little further.

"You can share my tent." Xiongzhong said after a rushed dinner from the Lan's communal cookpot, a tasteless stew prepared from meat-free rations. He did not consider that the answer might be no.

Lan Wangji had grown used to sleeping in the same room as his betrothed, so much so that he had not considered how inappropriate that would be now that they had returned to the constraints of society.

Much as he wished it, the answer could not be no. Unless he wished for exactly the sort of rumors Wei Wuxian feared to dog his every step.

Settled into companionable silence in their bedrolls after dinner, Lan Wangji did not feel tired. The right ingredients for sleep were no longer there. He missed the sound of Wei Wuxian's breathing, the soft light behind his eyelids as Wei Wuxian worked or read or crafted into the night.

But Xiongzhong's presence was comforting too. It meant he really was here, alive for Lan Wangji to save.

He could wait as long as it took, for the day Wei Wuxian would be at his side forever. If Xiongzhong believed a lie in the meantime, that could only make the intimidating persona that was his betrothed yet not more convincing, make the other sect leaders less likely to break their deal. Soon enough, Xiongzhong would learn the truth, and be happy for him.

He never needed to know Lan Wangji's feelings were not returned.

When Wei Wuxian agreed to marry him, everything in Lan Wangji had shut down. Dizzy with disbelief, he clung to that rabbit like a lifeline, and followed where he led.

No book could be long enough to contain all the things he had not said in that moment. All the ways he could have confessed.

*I did not realize it until the prospect of losing you came up, but I have very rapidly fallen for you. I want you to be mine. I want to be yours. I can't let someone else have you without*

*speaking up. Take responsibility for what you have done to my heart.*

*I cannot wait to marry you.*

*Please push me down right here on the ground and demonstrate your favorite sexual fantasy immediately.*

Lan Wangji was not certain what his own fantasies would be, after years of tearing his mind away from specifics. As quietly as he could, he reached into the qiankun bag in the sleeve of his day robes, and pulled out a book.

On the day they left the mountain, Wei Wuxian left the spring book he had tried to show Lan Wangji on his chair. He had packed the last of his qiankun bags in his sleeves, and left to aid his grandmothers.

Lan Wangji hesitated. Reached for it and retracted his hand multiple times before his hand closed around its spine, and he stowed it among his things.

Under the cover of his bed roll, with only the light provided by the same sort of talisman used in Baoshan Sanren's library, Lan Wangji cracked it open.

The mechanics of sex were not a mystery to him. But this was nothing like the clinical informational pamphlet that disciples in the Cloud Recesses were discretely directed to when their bodies began to change, with the strict addendum to remember the rules regarding promiscuity applied to all extramarital explorations.

In the privacy of the Jingshi, he had touched himself. Sometimes, Lan Wangji liked to deny himself release, mediating away the hardness between his legs. He found it made the eventual satisfaction that much sweeter.

There were other things he had wanted to try, but he was not brave enough to walk into a shop and purchase the things he needed to — to fuck himself properly.

That would change with Wei Wuxian, if he was amenable.

He would gather the requisite items himself if necessary.

But first, he needed to learn what his betrothed found so fascinating within these pages. Ears burning, he began to read.

This book was anything but dry.

A spy infiltrated the Imperial Palace of a fictional land, using secret techniques to jump the ranks to the Emperor's side. The Emperor was not kind to the spy at first, but the spy used an unusual tactic, and would not permit the Emperor to treat him as lesser. The Emperor had never been spoken to in such a way, but rather than anger him, he drew him closer. Not knowing why, and not knowing the object of his affection was a spy.

The spy, meanwhile, liked the man he had been hired to betray far too much.



By the time the spy ordered the Emperor to his knees, and deigned to let him suck his cock, it took all of Lan Wangji's energy to remain still, to keep his hips from seeking friction against the too-soft bedding above him.

Xiongzhong was only a few feet away. Lan Wangji could not indulge, though he had never teased himself for this long. One lack of privacy replaced with another.

Snuffing the light, he pressed the heel of his hand down on his erection, and tried to will it away with thoughts of making small talk with the Jin.

## Chapter End Notes

my beta (thanks JasmineTin!) called the first scene fluffy when I was going for angsty



I hope the time skip wasn't too confusing!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 7

## Chapter Summary

Wangxian go on an espionage date and experience their first battle of the Sunshot Campaign. Jin Zixuan is awkward around his fiancé

## Chapter Notes

Hello I'm back! This was a bit longer between updates than I intended but at least it was productive? By which I finished two other fics (one of which I'll be posting fairly soon, the other I'm not allowed to post until May)

**CW:** vague bondage fantasy, cql-sunshot campaign type violence (specifically the infectious puppets) + medical treatment of ordinary wounds (significant characters) and people infected by the puppets (random background cultivators, one of whom gets mercy killed in the first few paragraphs)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

It was not strictly —or at all — appropriate for Lan Wangji to sneak off with his betrothed without a chaperone.

He did not particularly care.

Wei Wuxian had come up to him and said, “So, if we’re going to make it to Wen Ruohan, I need a better idea of what I’m up against. Want to sneak into a Wen camp with me?”

If Wei Wuxian had actually been trying to court him, he could not have suggested a better outing.

Lan Wangji nodded, and Wei Wuxian lit up like the sunrise he was never awake to witness.

Wei Wuxian had obtained the location of the Wen camp during a meeting of sect leaders to which Lan Wangji had not been invited. Or rather, despite the fact that the assistants and of other sect leaders had attended, Xiongzhang had ignored his protests to insist he “rest” after his “ordeal.”

As though Lan Wangji had not been resting for the past few months.

He had gone instead to see if he could assist Wen Qing and Jiang Yanli in the treatment of cultivators infected by Wen Ruohan’s puppets.

He arrived to find Wen Qing slashing the throat of one too far gone to be saved, careful to shield herself from the spray of black blood. She sketched a talisman in the air, and the body disintegrated into ash on the sheets.

When she noticed him hovering in the tent flap, he was roped into keeping the last few patients still while she induced healing comas and applied creams to slow the progression. She had not stopped working since their arrival. And neither, it seemed, had his betrothed. While Lan Wangji had been fantasizing about him in his bed roll, he had been helping Wen Qing save lives.

That morning, though, he was a pair of rested hands, and when the last patient had been dealt with, and Jiang Yanli prodded Wen Qing onto a pallet in the corner of the tent, and thanked Lan Wangji for his assistance.

The Wen camp was only an hour's sword flight away, close enough they could not move the entire camp in case of attack, but far enough they would at least have warning.

They found the puppets in a roped-off enclosure on the edge of the camp, milling aimlessly about the center, completely uninterested in others of their kind, or at the edges, grasping for the living guards. Black blood seeped from their eyes, from the open meridians in cracked, craggy volcanic skin. Their wide, warped swords were piled up outside the enclosure, caked in blood from making more of themselves.

The guards faced inward with swords extended towards the undead. They were clearly there to keep the puppets contained while Wen Ruohan was not actively controlling them. On high alert against one sort of threat, entirely unaware of another.

Together, they were able to knock out the four guards surrounding the circular enclosure without raising the alarm.

Under any other circumstances, it would have been more beneficial to kill the guards, but the puppets would go into a frenzy at the smell of blood and break right out of their enclosure. Death did not prevent a Wen from rising.

Ravenous corpses on top of puppets would be inconvenient.

Together, they dragged the unconscious guards to a treeline they hoped was out of range of the puppets' senses.

Wei Wuxian tied up the guards very... efficiently.

He folded the rope in half before beginning to tie, looping it around the wrists of the unconscious guards behind their backs and pulling tight. With Lan Wangji's assistance in propping them up, he tied them together around trees by the waist. When he ran out of rope, he formed a loop and pulled a new length through, adding a new length onto the first, and kept going until they were bound from shoulder to waist. Immobilized to the point where they could not so much as twitch their upper bodies.

What would Wei Wuxian's hands feel like, gentle in contrast to the rough slide of rope against bare skin?

Lan Wangji had reached the point in Wei Wuxian's spring book where the emperor woke up tied to his bed, while his lover rifled through his belongings.

The emperor had, against all the odds, offered his forgiveness, resulting in a scene Lan Wangji had not been able to finish, putting him in so dire a state he had needed to recite the disciplines in his uncle's imagined voice for an entire *shichen* to calm himself.

"If they struggle, they'll end up losing the use of their hands." Wei Wuxian shrugged, dismissively cold as he surveyed his work. "But war is war, right?"

It was unreasonably attractive that he knew that.

"I can't believe no one's tried to catch one of these before." As though he had not just put Lan Wangji in a state he did not know what to do with, Wei Wuxian turned his attention to the puppets. With his hands on his hips in a confident wide-legged stance.

Lan Wangji tried to remember how to breathe.

Focus.

He could deal with these feelings *after* the war. When they were married.

If ever.

"We did, before the puppets became infectious like this. After...I imagine it wasn't worth the risk."

"A greater risk than dragging the bodies into mass graves? Or just leaving them on the ground where they can infect wildlife? There could be all sorts of little cuts on people's hands they haven't noticed, or the puppet might come back to life. It's happened before — Wen Qing ranted about it for ages. If someone had just tried to find a way to make sure they were dead and had some gloves made —" He pursed his lips, and sighed heavily. "A-Ma always said the cultivation world was too afraid of discovery."

Lan Yi wasn't entirely wrong. But in this case, their apprehension was reasonable. There was no one like Wei Ying, no one who had mastered death like he had.

Wei Wuxian produced *Chenqing* and brought it to his lips, playing almost inaudibly. Lulling, breathy cut off phrases that seemed almost gentle in comparison to the usual sharp whistles. A lullaby for the undead.

Lan Wangji forgot to keep watch as Wei Wuxian's eyes changed, reddening more slowly than usual, as if one drop of blood at a time swirled into his irises. A breeze picked up, making his robes billow, his hair fly back in a wild tangle, nature itself framing Wei Wuxian for his benefit.

The puppets paused in their milling, not frozen like statues, but swaying slightly in an unnatural dance to the rhythm of the wind. A single puppet broke off from the group, walking into the ropes, continuing to try to move forward until the fence posts gave way, and the puppet fell on its face. It did not attempt to catch itself, and remained facedown where it had fallen.

Wei Wuxian's song changed, to shorter notes and fewer pauses, and the puppet flipped onto its back, climbing unevenly to its feet, and making its way towards them. This was the first time Lan Wangji had seen the new sort of puppet in person, and its visage set his hair on end and teeth on edge. He fought the urge to pull Wei Wuxian onto Bichen and sweep him away from there. They could find another way to win.

But the puppet stopped a short distance away from them, and stood there, docile.

Lowering Chenqing, Wei Wuxian stepped forward to examine it from all angles, circling it slowly. There was no means of telling anything of the puppet's former identity, save that it wore the robes of a Wen. They were all Wen or ordinary people, the change occurring too slowly for Lan or Wen or Jin to join their ranks before the fallen could be disposed of by their compatriots.

Wei Wuxian reached out to touch, though he had only *just* warned of the dangers. Lan Wangji lunged to stop him, only for his own wrist to be caught in his grasp. Fury filled his still-red eyes, his grip tight enough to grind bone, to make Lan Wangji's breath catch and hold.

He softened, letting go, a sheepish tilt to his mouth. "It won't infect me. I just need to check something."

Lan Wangji could only stand there, numb, and watch as Wei Wuxian dipped his forefinger in the oozing black blood. As he rubbed it between finger and thumb, smoke began to seep from his skin, and when it stopped, the blood was gone.

"At this stage, it's definitely irreversible." Wei Wuxian mused. "They're not technically fierce corpses, but..."

"They might as well be." The conclusions of every healer back at camp were that once someone was infected, there was nothing to be done. Every healer save Wen Qing, at least. And even so, beyond a certain point, her only option was a mercy kill.

"There's no one in there anymore." Wei Wuxian prodded at the side of the puppet's head, and it tilted under his touch before bobbing back and forth as if to prove his point. "Wen Ruohan could see us through them if he wanted to, but he controls so many - he must tell them to follow the orders of a commanding officer."

"Humans are fallible."

"That they are," Wei Wuxian said. "The real question is the best way to take these out from a distance. People have been getting infected from the splatter of blood in their eyes and mouths, not just the swords, and they keep going if you cut off their heads."

“Wen Qing used a disintegration talisman.” An image that would be burned into his mind forever.

Lan Wangji had killed before. His own people, turned to that first sort of puppet during the first attack on a branch clan right before the lectures. The disciples under his command had looked politely to the side as he composed himself in the bushes, after. Wens, when he arrived to the burning of the Cloud Recesses. Nothing like that mercy kill.

Wei Wuxian shook his head. “Those aren’t really large scale, and they take up too much energy for the average cultivator.”

“Are they flammable?” If they could not be transformed directly to dust, perhaps an indirect method.

“One way to fine out!” Wei Wuxian brightened. “Want to do the honors?”

He wanted, so badly, to make him smile. But —

There was something wrong here. It was too quiet.

“Xiongzhong said there have been hundreds of puppets in every battle.” There were scarcely one hundred here, and Lan Wangji realized belatedly he had seen no more than a single cook fire from overhead as they approached. Someone should have come by the enclosure by now.

Wei Wuxian rushed over to the nearest tent, and pulling back the flap to peak inside. He repeated it with the next and the next, and Lan Wangji knew he had been correct.

“Most of these tents are empty.” Panicked, Wei Wuxian met his eyes.

“This isn’t the real Wen camp.” He confirmed.

The Sunshot Campaign had been left without its best weapon.

Wei Wuxian scrawled a talisman in the air, setting the rope fence aflame. With a short ditty on Chenqing, smoke rose up to fan the flames. The cultivators of the decoy camp shouted, running in all directions, as fire caught and spread, consuming the puppets first of all. Wei Wuxian opened his arm, the resentment for his teleportation technique beginning to gather.

Lan Wangji stepped into his embrace, and when the darkness cleared, they were in the center of chaos.

They landed in the midst of an ambush already in progress, and Sect Leader Yao attempted to stab him — perhaps by mistake, perhaps not, before Lan Zhan shoved him away. With Lan Zhan at his back, Wei Wuxian was free to handle their enemies without worry of friendly fire.

He wished he could watch Lan Zhan truly in action. He was a wonder to observe in a spar; he was magnificent in a battle. But longing for the man he had backed into a corner with their betrothal could wait until they were no longer at war.

Gaining control of this many puppets at once would strain his reserves. And keeping his power at such a low level earlier had no been easy either. Every breath pushed into Chenqing was an exertion, the sharp scales resisting him as they had not since he cleansed the Burial Mounds.

And on the field, cultivators fought, died, turned. A thousand puppets against a few hundred cultivators.

Mianmian spun from one puppet to the next, there and gone before the spatter of black blood could graze her.

Lan Xichen and his disciples fought from a distance, providing cover to the others with musical cultivation and the Lans' characteristic mastery of sword glares.

Nie Mingjue was in the thick of things, his forces directed in smaller groups smart enough to stay out of Baxia's range.

Jin Guangshan stood at the center of a group of his disciples, directing them with his sword still clean. His son was likewise flanked by his cousin and several other disciples, though he fought despite his pallor, his still recovering energy, his limp.

At the top of a hill just within view, the living Wen cultivators held back from the battle, watching on horseback as the tide turned against them.

Wei Wuxian cut off his tune with a sharp high note, a not-so metaphorical snapping of necks. As one, the strings of the puppets under his control broke, and they fell to the ground. Spines, femurs, shins, tibias, humeri, radii, ulnas — every bone necessary to move shattered.

A horn blew, sounding the retreat. Or, no — just as Lan Zhan sent off a burst of his sword flare, just as the first volley reached them, Wei Wuxian wrapped an arm around his waist and swept him into the dark, taking a single step through the shadows, just far enough to put them on the edge of the battlefield, outside of range.

The Wen Cultivators had sent off a volley of arrows to cover their retreat.

“Xiongzhang—” Lan Wangji lurched out of his arms, but Lan Xichen was safe only steps away, organizing his disciples to slash the arrows down. He was quick to join in, summoning his guqin to send vines made of light to snatch the arrows from the air. One of A-Ma's techniques.

A second volley, on the heels of the first, as the Sunshot campaign's combatants raced for cover, scattering for the closest shelter. Jin Zixun abandoned his cousin on the battlefield to hide behind the Lan.

Jin Zixuan started to jump away, but his leg gave out under him. And the Lan disciples could not catch every arrow. Not even Lan Zhan, talented as he was. An arrow pierced through, its trajectory headed straight for Jin Zixuan's heart.

Wei Wuxian tried to throw up a wall of resentment to shield them, but the ghosts screamed in his head, and he knew he had could manipulate no more resentment that day. Not without crossing a boundary he had set in stone for not only his own safety, but the good of the world.

He did not much like Jin Zixuan, but Mianmian did, and Lan Zhan only pretended not to. And if Jin Zixuan died in the first battle after Wei Wuxian returned him, that would reflect poorly. Wei Wuxian did not pull Suibian fast enough to send forth a flare of his own.

But out on the field, Meng Yao grabbed Jin Zixuan by the armpits, and began to drag him free —just in time for another arrow to pierce his arm.

The last of the Wen vanished into the setting sun.

“Lan Zhan, your cheek —” His hand rose to hover over a deep gash scoring Lan Zhan’s beautiful face. Already worn thin by his excessive use of resentment, his temper flared. If one of those *things* had dared harm *his* betrothed, he would march into Qishan that second and have the ghosts of Wen Ruohan’s victims tear him to shreds right this second and *take* the Yin Iron that was rightfully his. Damn the consequences.

“A graze from an arrow.” Lan Zhan assured him.

Red blood flowed from the cut.

Red blood.

Red.

He closed his eyes, thinking soothing thoughts of A-Ma’s bedtime stories and Waipo’s hands guiding his through the steps of a knot. Innocent things of childhood that sent smoke rising from his pores, returning to the air to be snatched up by the ghosts of the new dead.

His spiritual energy collected in his fingertips, and they glowed golden.

Lan Zhan grabbed his hand, shaking his head. “It will close soon enough, please do not waste your energy.”

“Silly Lan Zhan, I can spare enough for this.” Healing a cut was simple enough, just enough to turn Lan Zhan’s own rapid healing from fast to immediate. Unable to resist, he stroked the line of the gash with his thumb. It came away with only a smear of blood.

Lan Zhan’s lips parted. He did not look away, though there were so many things to do in the aftermath. Lives to save, bodies to burn. The survivors would need to eat. For a moment, for so long as Lan Zhan, smeared in blood and all the more beautiful for it, stared into his eyes, none of that mattered.

“Yiling Laozu, what did you do to my brother?” Lan Xichen demanded, and Lan Zhan stepped out of his reach.

He wanted to like Lan Xichen. Lan Zhan adored him, and Wei Wuxian had deceived him into believing he had stolen his baby brother away with nefarious intent. If someone even



suggested doing such a thing to Wen Ning or one of the younger disciples on the mountain, they would have been missing a head before the last word left their mouth.

So it was not unreasonable for Lan Xichen to want him away from Lan Zhan.

But Wei Wuxian's emotions were not reasonable when it came to Lan Zhan. He wanted to pull Lan Zhan close and inform Lan Xichen that his precious little brother had *chosen* to marry him, the villainous Yiling Laozu. Albeit for all the wrong reasons.

Lan Xichen was — honorable. Trusting. Practiced in pretending to enjoy the company of allies, infallibly friendly to those he liked, according to Lan Zhan.

Nothing could be more convincing of this charade than Lan Xichen's genuine disdain.

Yet Wei Wuxian's patience had worn thin. "Did you think I wouldn't use demonic cultivation in battle? Were you somehow mistaken regarding our deal?"

"You forget, I was opposed to this deal. Even so, I did not think you would use it *on my brother*." Lan Xichen hissed.

Hissed.

Lans didn't *hiss*.

Lan Zhan bristled, leaping to his undeserving defense. "He did not."

That was not, entirely, true. In transporting him through the space between life and death, Wei Wuxian had exposed Lan Zhan to resentment. But he certainly hadn't healed him with it. Resentment did not heal. It could glue together torn edges, but that was a dangerous game.

Better to raise the dead than waste energy keeping a doomed man alive.

"His corrupted energy is no different." Lan Xichen insisted— and great. Now he thought the terrible Yiling Laozu had brainwashed his brother.

Wei Wuxian wasn't entirely sure he *hadn't*. Lan Zhan had *proposed (political) marriage* after knowing him for a *few weeks*. But he hadn't brainwashed him on purpose.

And despite the intimidation his corruption of a Lan heir added to his mystique, the suggestion rubbed him wrong. "If you want to back out, I can just walk away now." He said. Cold, and for the barest fraction of a moment, uncaring.

Lan Xichen was too well aware of their situation to push further. He looked down at the ground, and Lan Zhan gave him a disappointed look.

"That's what I thought. I suggest you burn those bodies without touching them." He said more bitterly than intended and walked off the battlefield.

At least it contributed to the image they were trying to build for him.

His heart ached like the first time resentment flooded his meridians.

Jiang Wanyin and his cultivators shot the downed puppets with flaming arrows. Wei Wuxian had not yet had the time to modify a talisman for the job, so the uninjured cultivators and camp followers were kept busy keeping it contained.

Wei Wuxian helped to carry the injured and infected to an emergency space set up outside the medical tent, convincing those he could only touch their infected compatriots through cloth. He was quickly roped into boiling pots of water more quickly with his talismans alongside Mianmian. After demonstrating to the workers ordinarily responsible that they did not need an abundance of spiritual energy to use the talismans, he left them with a stack and picked up a bowl to carry where his assistance was most needed.

As he headed toward Wen Qing, he nearly knocked over a poor young laundress by mistake. Her load of clean linens very nearly tumbled into the dirt.

“Begging your pardon —” She gulped as she realized his identity. “Laozu!”

Wei Wuxian rummaged in his sleeve, sticking his tongue out the corner of his mouth as he attempted to locate the right talisman while balancing the heavy bowl of water one-handed. “Aha!” Triumphant, he raised the talisman high, and the bowl tilted dangerously back and froth before he managed to steady it. He stuck the talisman to the top of the pile of linens. “There you go, that should make it easier.”

“Oh! Yes!” Her face transformed with a relieved smile. “Thank you, Laozu.”

“It’s reusable, for a few hours, and here,” He wedged a stack of more talismans between layers, “For your friends.”

With another entirely unnecessary round of thanks, she bustled off, pleased.

Wen Qing yelled for him the moment she caught sight of him, despite the fact that he was obviously headed in her direction. “Wei Wuxian, help me stabilize some of these infected people while I prevent Nie-zongzhu’s assistant from bleeding out!”

Jin Zixuan was on the next pallet over from Meng Yao, blushing furiously as Jiang Yanli prodded at a wound in his side.

Mianmian nodded to him as she passed, carrying a stack of empty bowls.

Wei Wuxian set the bowl of water down at Wen Qing’s side, and addressed Meng Yao, who had had the presence of mind not to remove the arrow in his inner arm and was therefore still: A. Alive and B. Conscious, if remarkably green around the gills.

“That was brave of you, saving him.”

Meng Yao winced as Wen Qing rinsed a scalpel in a strong, clear spirit, the scent of alcohol strong enough to overpower the stench of rotten blood from the infected. “Yes, well. I’m

feeling rather stupid for it at the moment.”

“That’s what bravery is supposed to feel like,” Wei Wuxian informed him. *He* felt like an idiot frequently, and not just because Wen Qing frequently told him he was one. But he usually left someone better off than he found them, so he couldn’t just *stop* interfering in injustices when he saw them, or handing out talismans to laundresses to make their jobs easier.

“His — our — father pushed me down the stairs once.” Meng Yao said.

That explained... a lot. Wei Wuxian had been called a bastard boy often enough in his days on the streets that he had insisted any known illegitimate children be claimed in Yiling at the same time he convinced several childless older couples to found an orphanage together.

“Seems to me like you’re better off with the Nie.”

“It was my mother’s dying wish for me to me acknowledged,” Meng Yao said mournfully. “Maybe it will finally be fulfilled, posthumously.”

Wei Wuxian wished he believed Meng Yao was just being dramatic. But it sounded like he thought it would be worth it. “Yeah, no. Wen Qing’s not letting you die.”

“Stop dawdling, Wei Wuxian.” Wen Qing snapped.

“I’m going, I’m going.” He headed for the nearest infected patient he could find on the pallet on the other side of Jin Zixuan, as the infected had been mixed in with the other injured in the chaos, and took up the patient’s wrist.

“Nie-zongzhu won’t blame you if you let me die, you know.” Meng Yao said quietly.

“That doesn’t mean I’m going to let you.” Wen Qing had no patience for people telling her how to do her job. Or in general.

Wei Wuxian did enough to prevent the patient from deteriorating, sealing the golden core away from the infectious resentment that felt so like the monster that burst from the Burial Mounds in his youth, and killed his parents. It was all he or Wen Qing could do without weeks to dedicate to each. Only two of the doctors from the sects were both capable and willing to take the risk of the technique. Both were from Qinghe Nie, so it was probably their sect’s cultivation style that made them willing.

But with perhaps a hundred arrow wounds to treat, the doctors could not be spared from stitching people closed, and it was left to him to stabilize as many patients as possible. And while the doctors used needles, all Wei Wuxian had to work with was his own extensive, but not unlimited, supply of spiritual energy. And some lotion.

Completing her examination, Jiang Yanli took Jin Zixuan’s hands and pressed them down on a cloth over his side. “Just a graze. I’m sure you’re used to being waited on hand and foot, but you’re not at risk of bleeding out, and *he* has arrow in an artery.”

Wei Wuxian was not eavesdropping. It was not eavesdropping if he was close enough to overhear, and the speakers knew he was there.

“By all means.” Jin Zixuan assured her, strangely eager.

“Keep that pressure on the wound.” She warned him, stern.

“Yanli, I need your help!” Wen Qing called. “Mianmian, hold him down for me, Yanli wipe the blood away so I can see.”

Jiang Yanli quickly rushed over, and picked up a clean cloth, dipping it in water. Mianmian had returned while Wei Wuxian was watching the horse crashing into a tree at full tilt that was Jin Zixuan, holding Meng Yao down by his uninjured shoulder and hips. Wen Qing tied a knot tight around Meng Yao’s arm before she pulled the arrow free, reducing what would have been a torrent of blood to a flow. Meng Yao let out an ear-splitting scream, and passed out.

Wei Wuxian did not watch her stitch him up, because he had been there, done that, and would prefer to never again.

Mianmian looked like she was about to faint, but held steady. Jiang Yanli was as much in her element as Wen Qing.

Jin Zixuan stared after Jiang Yanli and though she might have overheard if she was not in the middle of assisting surgery, said, “She’s amazing.”

“Didn’t you almost break your engagement?” Wei Wuxian had heard the story from both Mianmian — in detail — and Lan Zhan — in passing. Apparently, he’d realized what he had after he’d nearly ruined it.

“Yeah,” he sighed dreamily, his hands relaxing on the cloth. So distracted by his own betrothed he forgot he was bleeding.

“Keep up the pressure or she’ll be disappointed in you.” Wei Wuxian told him.

Jin Zixuan hurriedly resumed his efforts.

Wei Wuxian moved to the next pallet, another cultivator with veins of pitch, and Wen Qing bandaged Meng Yao’s arm, leaving him for the next patient. Jiang Yanli, however, returned to treat Jin Zixuan. And of course, now that she had time for him, he looked anywhere but her.

It did not take long for Meng Yao to stir, or to notice Jin Zixuan staring. He seemed to be contemplating ripping his stitches when Jin Zixuan spoke.

“You saved me.”

Meng Yao stared at him blankly for a long moment. “I did.” He enunciated the syllables slowly, unable to believe this was happening.

“Thank you. I saw — that captain who —” Jin Zixuan said nonsensically. “It would have been easy for you to let me die. I haven’t treated you as well as I could have.”

Meng Yao arched a single eyebrow. “Have you ever pushed me into a latrine? Spread rumors my mother habitually entertained a dozen men at once and passed the habit down to me? Handed me rations full of maggots, perhaps?”

Sounded like the captain had deserved whatever he got.

“Well, no.” Jin Zixuan admitted, “But I didn’t stop anyone from spreading rumors, back in the Cloud Recesses.”

“You think I even remember a single afternoon’s worth of insults?” Meng Yao scoffed. “You’re awkward and frequently thoughtless, but not cruel.”

“...Thanks?” Jin Zixuan blinked repeatedly in conclusion. For a sect heir with an extensive political education, he knew remarkably little about taking to people.

Meng Yao laughed, clapping a hand to his injured arm.

“Please don’t kill my patient by mistake, Jin-gongzi.” Jiang Yanli said sweetly.

“I won’t, Jiang-guniang.” He promised earnestly, and winced as she tied off the bandage.

Meng Yao laughed harder, finally managing to pare it down to a snicker around which he managed to say. “You might, if only by accident.”

Jin Zixuan grumbled, until he looked at Jiang Yanli’s face again, and his jaw went slack.

Her fingers brushed across his stomach, lingering perhaps a moment too long before she sat back, wiping her hands on a damp towel.

Huh. Jin Zixuan might have redeeming qualities after all. Must be the parade of humiliation he’d put himself through recently. Wei Wuxian was happy to contribute.

“Wei — Laozu, is there a way I might help?” Lan Zhan said from behind him, and he immediately forgot all about contributing to Jin Zixuan’s continued humiliation.

“You might be able to, actually, I should have thought of that,” he said. “Come here, feel what I’m doing.”

Kneeling at his side, Lan Zhan placed a hand on his knee. A very distracting choice that required Wei Wuxian to focus harder to achieve the same results. But the moment Lan Zhan began to channel his spiritual energy, all other Lan Zhan-related distractions faded away.

Lan Zhan’s energy melded with his almost seamlessly, bearing light to sear the meridians against reinfection as Wei Wuxian chased the oily traces of resentment away from the core, wiping clean every trace. This would be the very first patient to recover from puppet infection, and it was all thank to Lan Zhan.

He needed Lan Zhan to know just how wonderful he was, but there were no words for it. Wei Wuxian settled for, “My clever Lan Zhan,” and watched the tips of his ears flush.

Wei Wuxian spent a perfectly reasonable amount of time looking into Lan Zhan’s eyes.

“Am I... interrupting something?” The infected cultivator had woken up, looking well enough.

Lan Zhan flinched back, stumbling to his feet and swayed.

Wei Wuxian caught him before he could fall, holding him close, panicked as he checked him over for an injury missed earlier.

But he had just pushed himself too far.

Wei Wuxian often forgot that Lan Zhan was his junior, but like this, peaceful, the tension gone out of him, he looked his age. He was strong, but he had not found his limits and conquered them in the physical manifestation of hell on earth, and lived a sheltered life until recently, when his own hell came to destroy everything and everyone he loved.

“You’re fine now.” He told the cultivator still staring at them as he brushed Lan Zhan’s hair back over his ear. “Hanguang-jun needs your pallet, and the medics need more people to carry water.”

“Yeah, okay.” The cultivator said as she got to her feet and bowed to him. “Thank you, Laozu.”

“Thank Hanguang-jun.” He said, and settled Lan Zhan in the place she had vacated rather than watch to see if she did.

Wei Wuxian could not stay and feed Lan Zhan energy until he woke no matter how much he wished to. The cultivator they had saved together was only one of nearly three score newly infected, and there were lives to save, even if he could only stabilize them as Wen Qing had originally asked.

By the time he was through, *he* was on the verge of collapse. Wei Wuxian made it to his tent before passing out, the legend of the Yiling Laozu intact.

## Chapter End Notes

It's whumping the jin bros to make them talk to each other hours

Since this is a long fic that features bdsm and this is the chapter where Lan Wangji starts having more specific (sub) fantasies, this feels like a good place to mention that I will be making all of the smut scenes skippable! I'll list kinks for each scene in the content warnings + start/end phrases. I'll also update the tags when I'm, ya know, sure what

they'll be, other than bondage (now added). Please feel free to contact me privately on twitter/tumblr (anon is also open on tumblr) if you're concerned I might include something. As someone who's run into untagged no-goes many a time, I will not mind!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 8

## Chapter Summary

Plans are made and Lan Wangji continues to be horny

## Chapter Notes

**CW: lxc incorrectly thinks wxw is physically coercing lwj**

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sect leaders gathered around the war table to review the damages caused by the ambush. It had taken three days to account for everything with the camp in disarray.

Jin Guangshan stood at the head of the table, surveying them all with what he seemed to think was a benevolent smile. “Our losses were limited, all things considered. An espionage team was caught in the act of attempting to sabotage our stores, and the Wen forces were made to retreat without a single remaining puppet while our casualties were fewer than we’ve seen since the reclamation of Yunmeng.”

Nie Mingjue snorted indelicately, and said with distaste, “The only reason that wasn’t a *complete* disaster was the Yiling Laozu.”

Nie Mingjue might not like him, but he gave credit where credit was due.

“Yes, but he *wasn’t* here when the ambush began, was he? I wonder why that could be.” That cousin of Jin Zixuan’s, who blew him out of the water in degree of annoying, drawled. For some reason he was still attending the meetings, despite Jin Zixuan’s return and the fact that none of the other clans had more than two representatives.

Wei Wuxian had been part of the Sunshot Campaign for less than a week, and already he better understood Jin Zixuan’s reasons for insisting on this subterfuge. Jin Guangshan had dreams of empire, and he intended to turn Wen Ruohan’s dreams of the same to his advantage. Even if they were losing.

How could someone like that understand any motivation but a power grab?

“Indeed, when the fighting began, the Yiling Laozu was nowhere to be found, despite his promises.” Jin Guangshan steepled his fingers as he turned his attention on Wei Wuxian, eager to siphon off what little respectability he had. “Care to explain?”



Tilting his gaze toward the ceiling, Wei Wuxian leaned against a tent-pole and let the insults roll off him. “I needed information none of you had.”

“What information?” Sect Leader Yao blurted out.

Wei Wuxian twirled Chenqing between his fingers and did not bother to look at him. “If you ask nicely, maybe I’ll tell you.”

“Withholding information is not the behavior of a trustworthy ally.” Jin Guangshan said, patronizing.

“Questioning the every move of an ally is not the behavior of one who should be trusted.” Wei Wuxian said. “You know Hanguang-jun was with me, and yet you still think I was up to something nefarious?”

“You swept my brother off to who knows where, and you won’t even say why?” Lan Xichen did not quite shout, but Zewu-jun was not so unflappable as his reputation had claimed.

It helped with the plan, Wei Wuxian reminded himself. He should not be irritated by achieving the results he wanted.

Yet once again, he was.

Though he had mastered demonic cultivation, extensive uses of resentment did not exactly *help* his temper. It made him cold, and angry, and easier to be exactly what the cultivation world expected of him. Especially now, when everything around him reinforced his mood, and he had nothing productive to do with his hands, for a tyrannical warlord did not make jewelry in his spare time. Only moments snatched with Lan Zhan improved his mood, and those were far too few and far between. Lan Xichen made certain of that.

“I will tell you, if you treat me as an equal. Surely one of you must remember what courtesy looks like.”

Meng Yao stepped forward, his eyes cast demurely to the ground. “May this one know what Laozu learned on his scouting mission?”

“Thank you, Meng Yao. The rest of you could stand to learn something from his example.” Wei Wuxian honestly had no idea what Meng Yao thought of him, which was likely his intention. He didn’t *think* Meng Yao disliked him as much as most, after their conversation in the medical tent, but who could tell really?

The sect leaders and their spouses and heirs bristled at the unfavorable comparison, and he thought Meng Yao looked pleased. Maybe. If Lan Zhan was a book written in code, Meng Yao was a book with half his pages were glued together.

Wei Wuxian *did* share what he had learned at the decoy Wen camp after that, because he was a man of his word. But he ducked out when the meeting devolved into petty squabbling over tactics that would not work. His time could be better spent anywhere else.

Jin Zixuan, Jiang Wanyin, and Nie Mingjue watched him go, looking like they wished they could join him.

Before he had gone a half dozen steps, someone ran into him. The same young laundress from the other day, he realized, when she bowed and said, “This one is sorry again, Laozu. This one is very clumsy.”

But this time, she did not shake in fear.

“That’s quite all right. How did the talisman I gave you work out?” He asked.

She perked up. “Oh, wonderfully, we were all able to work much more quickly. We asked the scribes to copy the talismans for us and well — thank you!”

He laughed, his mood lightening for the first time since he last saw Lan Zhan. “It was no problem.”

As he whistled on his way to find a task to do and a betrothed to bother, more than one camp follower paused in their task to wave to him, or bow. Even a few outer disciples greeted him politely.

The Yiling Laozu was everything the gentry despised, but the gentry were far from everyone.

The Sunshot Campaign would not be ready to march for another five days, which meant there were five days to come up with a viable plan. As Wei Wuxian complained extensively over dinner about the over the way their leaders seemed determined to hit their heads against a wall rather than come up with anything new, with Jin Zixuan’s tacit agreement, Lan Wangji figured someone else would have to find a solution, and then convince Jin Guangshan it had all been his idea.

Someone else meaning one of the five of them seated around this fire, secluded by Wei Wuxian’s tent.

Or... seven.

Jiang Yanli approached, smiling, with a large tureen of soup in her hands, her brother scowling at her heels.

“A-Jie, I have things to do.” Jiang Wanyin whined, likely not yet realizing they could hear him, for his usual obsession with propriety was nowhere in evidence.

“If you don’t eat something now, you are going to keel over. You can’t get any work done if you’re recovering in the medical tent.” Jiang Yanli said.

“I can eat while I’m working,” he said.

Lan Wangji wished he would. Pleasant as Jiang Yanli was, Lan Wangji would prefer not to deal with more people at once. Particularly not her brother, who he respected, but did not

like. He was far too loud, and not in the pleasant way of Lan Wangji's betrothed.

"My soup deserves better than that." She set the tureen on the ground near the fire, and collected a bowl that had previously contained their dinner from Mianmian, seated closest to her. "I made some to share."

Jiang Wanyin plopped himself down on the opposite log next to Jin Zixuan, and proceeded to scowl at him until he scooted away, looking around nervously. Mianmian elbowed him in the side.

"You're a goddess." Wei Wuxian praised her upon eating his first mouthful. Lan Wangji experienced a brief flash of jealousy until he tried it for himself, a bowl spooned out without the chunks of meat, and discovered it was just that delicious.

Jiang Yanli smiled, a small soft thing, and looked down at her own bowl. "It's the least I can do for the people who saved us all."

"Why Jiang-guniang, you'll make me blush," Wei Wuxian clapped his hands over his cheeks, making himself look like a chipmunk as he grinned. Some might have described the expression as distorted, demonic, more evidence of the Yiling Laozu's dastardly nature.

Lan Wangji thought it was cute.

Jiang Yanli smiled indulgently at him like he was a small mischievous child, far more capable of recognizing that Wei Wuxian's flirting was fake than Lan Wangji. "That was quite the miracle you two pulled off."

"We shouldn't have. It's not —"

"I'm not strong enough." Lan Wangji said. Saving just the one cultivator had drained him utterly. He would never be able to gain enough strength to aid the dozens of other victims in time. On top of that, he had fainted into his betrothed's arms, and he could not even remember the feeling of them around him.

"I was going to say we're not ready. *I* can't perform that trick again if I'm still needed to defeat Wen Ruohan."

Wei Wuxian was likely just humoring him. He was often far too humble beneath the arrogant act he put on, wanting those he did not need to fear him to see him as approachable. Someone they could joke with. Ordinary, despite his abilities, though he was anything but.

"You proved it's possible." Wen Qing said, "You don't have to save everyone, either of you. It's my responsibility to treat the infected, and yours to make sure this comes to an end."

"That sounds suspiciously like something I told you earlier, Qing-jie." Mianmian said.

"Yes, well." Wen Qing shifted her head so the side of her pinky grazed Mianmian's, and pointedly did not look at her. "It was a good point."

"How are you going to defeat him? You must have a plan." Jiang Wanyin asked.

“Ah, sort of.” Wei Wuxian waved a hand, deflecting. “It would be much more difficult to wrest control of Wen Ruohan’s puppets at close proximity. I would probably need my own piece of Yin Iron, and as Jin-gongzi can attest, touching one of those is not a good idea.”

Jin Zixuan rubbed his injured leg, grimacing. “My bones still feel hollow, and every night I wake from a nightmare unable to move.”

“Oh, how awful.” Jiang Yanli ladled out an extra serving of soup for him as her brother glowered.

Jiang Wanyin dragged his attention back to his interrogation of Wei Wuxian. “You promised the sect leaders you could handle him.”

“I can. That doesn’t mean it’s easy. Wen Ruohan doesn’t know how to make friends with ghosts.” Wei Wuxian said. “Nightless City is full of the ghosts of those he wronged. And the cemeteries will be full of centuries worth of people whose legacy he’s destroyed and descendants he’s murdered.”

Jiang Wanyin drew himself up, and yelled. “Desecrating graves is —”

Wei Wuxian expertly cut him off without raising his voice in turn. “Disrespectful, unorthodox, a crime against nature, I know. They won’t rise if they don’t want to. Most do when it’s for revenge.”

He shrugged.

Not all the dead had ghosts remaining on the earthly plane, but part of the soul remained with the body. This part was enough to answer a yes or no question conveyed in song, Wei Wuxian had explained, when Lan Wangji asked. One of the few scraps of how demonic cultivation worked that Lan Wangji had so far been able to gather.

He was not inclined to share those crumbs with anyone else. Holding them close, a secret between him and Wei Wuxian — and those who had known him longer — might unlock more of Wei Wuxian to him in the future. And he was selfish, wanting to hoard all of Wei Wuxian that he could for himself.

Jiang Wanyin’s frown deepened until the creases in his forehead tripled in number. “Wen Ruohan doesn’t seem to have a problem forcing it.”

“He doesn’t ask. I do. Permission is key to control. You wouldn’t want to see me lose it.” Wei Wuxian smiled, and a chill breeze swept across the fire, making it gutter before springing back to life.

For Wei Wuxian’s sake, Lan Wangji did not truly wish him to lose control. But the goosebumps that sprung up on his skin did not come from the cold.

“You would think,” Jiang Yanli mused, “that a palace as large and ancient as the Palace of the Sun and Flames would have more than one entrance.”

“It was built to be a fortress,” Wen Qing said. “There is a secret passageway into the palace, but it’s specially warded. Even Wei Wuxian couldn’t break through without alerting my uncle. We’ve discussed it.”

“What if we didn’t have to worry about him finding out? We could flip his own technique back on him.” Mianmian said. “Instead of hiding a larger force with a smaller one, we disguise a smaller one with a larger one.”

“Do you really think my father would go for that?” Jin Zixuan asked

“If he could still take credit,” she said.

Jin Zixuan’s mouth twisted, considering, and he shrugged.

Lan Wangji hmped under his breath.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, we can’t just have a coup in the middle of a war. He *is* an ally.” Wei Wuxian teased, bumping his shoulder against Lan Wangji’s. How had Wei Wuxian learned to read him so quickly, when even his uncle frequently misread him? Xiongzhong was usually the only one who recognized an expression other than angry, though his interpretations were currently colored by the manner in which Lan Wangji’s betrothal had come to pass.

But with Wei Wuxian, the only exception seemed to be Lan Wangji’s feelings for him.

He ought to be grateful.

“Technically.” Wen Qing grumbled. Mianmian took her hand and put it back on the handle of the soup she had been neglecting. Startled to find it there, she resumed eating, with a thankful murmur that made Mianmian smile softly, pleased.

Mianmian had taken a less forward tact in her pursuit since their arrival in the Sunshot Campaign’s camp, to fit with the more somber mood around them. It seemed to be working, by virtue of Wen Qing having no idea it was happening.

If he were not spending so much time under Xiongzhong’s watchful eye, Lan Wangji would have attempted something similar. Wei Wuxian had scraped the bottom of his bowl sometime earlier, and set it aside.

“I am aware that we cannot depose him.” Lan Wangji said. “That does not stop me from wishing.”

Wei Wuxian was not the only one who laughed, surprising him. His tone had been monotonous as ever, and yet Mianmian buried her face in her hands, shaking. Wen Qing arched a brow, her lips pursing the same way as when she tried not to laugh at Wei Ying’s jokes. Even Jiang Wanyin’s nostrils flared.

“I’m glad you’re all so eager to subject me to constant political maneuvering for the rest of my life.” Jin Zixuan grumbled.

Jiang Yanli giggled, and Jin Zixuan turned a disturbing shade of puce as he seemed to realize he had just managed a complete sentence in front of his betrothed without offending her.

He had, however, still offended her brother. It was possible to offend Jiang Wanyin simply by breathing, and the probability increased exponentially when one had loudly denounced their betrothal to his sister. Jiang Wanyin got to his feet. "Dinner's over, and *some* of us have work to do before we march."

"Oh! Yes, we *have* lingered longer than I intended. Thank you all for the pleasant company." When Jiang Yanli glanced at Jin Zixuan, only Mianmian's intervention saved him from slipping off the log, despite the fact that she also looked at everyone else.

"It's been wonderful to get to know you better, Jiang-guniang, and thank you for your feedback, Jiang-zongzhu."

"For heaven's sake, it's Jiang Cheng," he said, and stomped off.

Wei Wuxian stared after him in confusion. "I guess he doesn't hate me...?"

"My brother has a unique way of expressing himself. He would like to be friends." Jiang Yanli interpreted for them.

"Oh! Well, please tell him I'd be happy to."

"I will," she said, and followed after her brother.

"I have to get back to my patients." Wen Qing said, after a delay, though she had the wide-eyed, rare-blinking quality of one trying very hard not to nod off. Continuing to stare into the fire, she did not move to leave.

"You need to sleep. They kicked you out for a reason." Mianmian said. "I already stole your bedroll and put it in my tent. Unfortunately, we have another five bunk mates, but none of them snore. And none of them will wake screaming in the middle of the night or turn you into the living undead."

Wen Qing was too exhausted not to humor her, and even leaned on Mianmian as she guided her through the maze of tents.

"Ah, Wen Qing is stubborn." Wei Wuxian said, looking after them. "I bet you it will take a while for them to sort things out, even if Mianmian comes right out and says it."

"I have faith in Mianmian." At the very least, she was persistent. And she was certainly more successful at expressing her interest than Lan Wangji. Sometimes Lan Wangji felt that he wore a sign that read *kiss me, betrothed* around his neck and Wei Wuxian had taken one look at it and asked if he was holding it for Jin Zixuan.

But then he remembered how little he understood what Wei Wuxian felt for their impending nuptials, and remembered the heart was a difficult organ.

“And to think, you spent so much time refusing to believe the two of you were friends.” Wei Wuxian chuckled, the planes and hollows of his face thrown into sharp relief by the firelight. He was beautiful. Lan Wangji wanted — he *wanted*.

“I had never had one before. I didn’t know that — this — was what it felt like.” His ears heated as he stumbled over the words, embarrassed to admit his failings, that Wei Wuxian would finally realize just who he had tied himself to. “I thought it would be more... sedate.”

Ironically, Jin Zixuan was the one who came closest to fulfilling his expectations for friendship.

Wei Wuxian frowned. “But you’re *wonderful*, tell me who didn’t want to be your friend, I’ll beat them up on behalf of little nine-year-old Lan Zhan.”

“Wei Wuxian,” he chastised, even more embarrassed at the flattery.

“I’m entirely serious,” Wei Wuxian pouted to show that he was, and wasn’t.

But he did not have all the facts. Lan Wangji doubted his betrothed would have been so interested in friendship if they had met mere weeks earlier. It was a blessing in disguise that they had missed each other in Yueyang, or their first interaction would have been Wei Wuxian using ghosts to kill a man, however deserving. Even if the evidence showed that man had later gotten up and walked away, likely as a fierce corpse reporting back to his master, Lan Wangji would have reacted with the same intensity as when he caught Nie Huaisang and Jiang Wanyin with alcohol in the guest dorms. “I was the head of discipline. It did not make it — easy. When I turned my classmates in for breaking curfew.”

“I would have made you *so* angry.” Wei Wuxian cackled.

“You would have, but I would have liked you anyway.” Lan Wangji simply would have been very angry about it.

“Look at you now, breaking rules. How many is it now? Associating with evil—”

“You are not evil.”

“Oh, I am, the dastardly villain carrying off poor virtuous Hanguang-jun.” He grinned, slow and wicked and Lan Wangji had no choice but to let himself be seduced. “But you. Breaking curfew, flattering me, holding grudges.” He shifted, one hand on the log as he leaned in. Though their eyes were level, Lan Wangji felt like Wei Wuxian towered over them. “Are you going to submit yourself for punishment?”

He joked.

Lan Wangji wished he wouldn’t.

In the spring book he had borrowed, the emperor pretended, at the end, that he did not forgive the spy, only to pardon him once the spy thought his heart would stop in his chest. And so when they were alone, the spy had teased the emperor for hours, driving him to the brink

only to stop just before he spilled, over and over again. Edging, the text had called it, and given Lan Wangji a name for an activity he had not known needed one.

If that was the sort of punishment Wei Wuxian had in mind, Lan Wangji would gladly sink to his knees and let him take what he pleased.

“If that is what you wish.” His blood rushed in his ears. He could not believe his forwardness.

Wei Wuxian leaned closer. “You shouldn’t give me so much power. I’ll take advantage.”

Lan Wangji hoped he would.

His eyelids flickered closed. Wei Wuxian’s nose brushed his —

— and his head jerked to the side, eyes reddening as he stared off into the woods on the edge of camp. “There’s something out there. Watching us.”

A ghost coiled together from air, followed by two more. A disciple from the Ouyang sect, a cook, and a poor youth. With a nod from Wei Wuxian, they darted into the trees.

“Another ambush?”

Wei Wuxian was still very close. Too close, to fully focus. Lan Wangji could feel his breath on his lips, warm amidst the chill evening air.

“I don’t think so. It’s hungry though, whatever it is.” Wei Wuxian mused.

Lan Wangji would be happy to dispatch whatever it was, Wen or demon, for interrupting that moment.

“Ah!” Wei Wuxian jumped. Lan Wangji automatically reached to comfort him, and his cheekbone collided with Wei Ying’s chin, a sudden shock of pain that made him gasp.

And Xiongzhong cried out in horror.

Lan Xichen paced the length of Nie Mingjue’s tent, as Nie Mingjue sprawled on a bedroll made up from furs he had personally hunted and Meng Yao knelt on the ground, tracking his endless back and forth with their eyes. It was not an unusual scene these days, though before his brother’s disappearance Lan Xichen had never paced in his life. A bad habit once begun, was difficult to break.

“Xichen, I don’t think there’s anything you can do.” Nie Mingjue said. “It’s unfortunate, but Wangji agreed in front of everyone.”

“How would you feel if it was Huaisang?” Lan Xichen snapped. Or rather, for him it was a snap, an unacceptable breach of etiquette toward his oldest friend. From anyone else, it would have been a mild expression of annoyance.



“If I really thought he was in danger, I would tear the world apart for him. But Huaisang is Huaisang.” Nie Mingjue shrugged.

“Yes, exactly.” Meng Yao added. “If it was Huaisang, I would assume he had a scheme in mind to become a young widower after the terms of the alliance were fulfilled.”

Nie Mingjue smacked his forehead with his palm. “Thank you, Meng Yao.”

“You told me to be more honest, Dage.” Meng Yao replied primly, his already perfect posture straightening further.

Under better circumstances, Lan Xichen would have laughed.

“Ready to tell me how you really feel about your brother then?” Nie Mingjue asked. In some ways, the line between classes of disciples had blurred over the past few months, as the war went more and more poorly. Among the Lan, the inner and outer disciples — at least those who had survived, outside of the Cloud Recesses when they burned — mingled, discarding the barrier that had always lingered unspoken between them. But Nie Mingjue, so often uncaring of society’s rules, had taken that relaxation the furthest, treating his disciples as friends, and insisting on keeping Meng Yao close until he believed his sect leader valued him.

“Absolutely not.” Meng Yao said, then slumped. “I’m not sure how I feel about that myself.”

Meng Yao had long assumed his estranged half-brother’s refusal to acknowledge his existence came out of disdain. Lan Xichen had been inclined to agree, from what little he knew of the man, but it now seemed possible he was merely as comfortable in social situations as well... Wangji.

“Thank you both, for trying to take my mind off this.” He said, with a shadow of his usual smile. “Where is Wangji? We missed dinner with the meeting...”

“Let me ask.” Meng Yao crossed the tend and stuck his head out of the flap, to exchange a few words with a passerby. When he returned, his expression as grave. “Lan-er-gongzi was last seen in the company of Jin-gongzi. And...”

“The Yiling Laozu. Again.” Lan Xichen’s heart plummeted through the ground until it reached the place where magma flowed beneath Qishan. Was there no limit to the arrogance of that horrible demon in the clothing of a man?

Lan Xichen shoved his way out of the tent, heading towards the tent at the edge of camp that the Yiling Laozu had claimed for his own. It was set apart from the other cultivators, his own decision, choosing not to force others to deal with his proximity in their sleep.

“Do you think he’s... done something to him?” He did not have to check to know Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao had both followed him.

“If he has, I’ll hold him down while you cut off his head.” Nie Mingjue growled. It was a peculiar property of sabers, and Baxia in particular, that made him sound much like a bear when he was angry. “*Both* heads.”

Meng Yao patted Nie Mingjue on his large, muscular bicep. “Slow down, Dage. I don’t think the Yiling Laozu I’ve met is interested in humiliating Lan-er-gongzi.”

“What do you call demanding his hand in marriage in front of every sect leader in the Sunshot Campaign?” Lan Xichen demanded. The Wangji he knew would have been shocked and ashamed, and accepted nevertheless, for the good of everyone else. The Yiling Laozu had read his target well.

“I do think he wants something he’s not saying. His behavior is different where the sect leaders can’t see, polite to the servants and teased by his first disciple like an old friend.” Meng Yao said, placating. Then more hesitantly added, “Perhaps it’s time to consider Lan-er-gongzi might not have been coerced.”

Lan Xichen shook his head. “Wangji thinks he has a debt to repay, and that it is up to him to save us all. He’s giving up his chance at happiness with a young lady who would be an excellent addition to our family for it. He told me himself.”

Nie Mingjue snorted. “Huaisang said that was the funniest, most likely to be false rumor he’d heard since Jin Guangjun claimed he had been kidnapped by mermaids.”

Jin Guangshan’s younger brother, Jin Zixun’s father had actually spent a year drinking on a beach several hours sword flight south of Gusu, avoiding his responsibilities as a new father. He had maintained the lie until the day his wife poisoned him.

Lan Xichen did not appreciate the comparison, from his oldest friend, and swept onward in silence. Both men apologized by the time they neared their destination, without his prompting.

The air around the Yiling Laozu’s tent was thick with resentment. And it was quiet, too quiet, for a group dinner.

Lan Xichen sprinted around the last corner, skidding to a halt on his heels. He had never been angrier in his life than in the past few days, not even when the Cloud Recesses burned. That was his little brother, and *no one* was allowed to touch him.

The Yiling Laozu loomed over Wangji, caging him against the log. He could not see Wangji’s face, but it was clear inappropriate behavior was underway.

Horried, he cried out, “Wangji!”

The Yiling Laozu’s head whipped around, his eyes glowing red. And a hundred ghosts popped into the mortal plane.

Under no circumstances could Wangji marry that man.

I have no plans to clarify what 3zun's relationship is by the way! If you want them to be an ot3 or pairing + third wheel or platonic friends then that's what they are. I was indecisive on which way I wanted to go and had it pointed out that there are already three pairings in the fic and I could just... not decide... so yeah!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 9

## Chapter Summary

Battles and a much needed conversation

## Chapter Notes

Thanks to a commenter, the 3zun situation in this fic should now be known as Schrodinger's 3zun

**CW:** battles but not very graphic, working oneself to exhaustion

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiongzhong had not left Lan Wangji alone for a moment since the evening he caught him scandalously close to his betrothed and thought Wei Wuxian was menacing him. For the time being, he could do little to alter that woeful misinterpretation of the circumstances.

It was not as though he could just come out and say he wanted Wei Wuxian to do terrible things to him. Lan Wangji would die of embarrassment if he tried to explain a even toned-down version of his desires to Xiongzhong, and at this point Xiongzhong would only take it as confirmation that Wei Wuxian had done something to warp his mind.

Lan Wangji had gone from hoping he might convince his betrothed to kiss him before marriage to catching glimpses of him astride a dark warhorse from across the ranks. At least they were pushing into Qishan, marching forward through Wen Ruohan's armies toward their goal. The march gave him little time to dwell, only to worry. Worry, and fight.

Mianmian and Jin Zixuan often rode with him, which Jin Guangshan permitted at first because he did not notice his son's absence, and then because he was pleased to see his son 'furthering his connections.' As if his motives were not simply to fight alongside those who would not leave him to the mercy of the enemy. Xiongzhong liked their presence for similar reasons to Jin Zixuan, for as much as he would have wished it, there was little chance he could remain at Lan Wangji's side throughout a battle as he and Nie Mingjue directed the bulk of the troops.

Wen Ruohan sent three more puppet armies against them, demolishing his own towns in the process.

While the first two battles were more like skirmishes, against perhaps two hundred puppets each, the third was worse by far. Wen Ruohan was done with cautious probing; now he tested the Yiling Laozu's abilities against a thousand. The force would have overwhelmed the Sunshot Campaign easily, without Wei Wuxian. Nor would they have made it this far into Qishan without his aid.

And though the camp followers understood his value, sparing some of what little seasoning remained in their stores for his food, and the ordinary disciples kept a wary but respectful distance, his peers resented him.

Worse, these puppets were different. The downed soldiers of the Sunshot Campaign, stolen away before they began burning their dead, still in the tattered robes of their former sects.

Lan Wangji saw the strain on his betrothed's face from a distance as the enemy rushed in, volleys from Wen archer complicating their counterattack before the first swords clashed. With the decimation of the Jiang sect, the Sunshot Campaign had few specialized archers on hand.

He held up a hand signaling the qin players following his lead should hold back from the fight.

"Can you shield us?" He asked the friends he had been dragged – internally kicking and screaming while outwardly calm – into making.

"I can," Mianmian spun her sword in her grip, making the sign that began the technique with her off-hand. "Think you can manage it this time, Lord Pinchusion?"

Jin Zixuan scowled as he mimicked her. "I guess we'll just ignore the fact that you started teaching that shield to me right before I got shot."

A net of gold and pale green spiritual energy sprung up before them, just like the shield that kept people from falling off Baoshan Sanren's mountain. Several arrows made impact, sent back along their paths of flight with equal force, before the first puppet bounced off. He did not see whether any of the arrows speared their archers.

Paying their continued bickering no mind, he positioned his fingers on the strings. Lan Wangji barely had a chance to engage in the previous two battles, but he had already intended to favor the long-range techniques he learned on the immortal mountain.

Strands of light burst from his fingertips as he played, passing through the shield with ease, for it was made of the same material. His light slashed puppets into bits with such precision the blood did not so much as splatter. The Lan disciples he had taught the technique joined in after the first verse.

Wei Wuxian's music finally joined in, delayed but drowning out the sounds of battle, even as his own continued. The song was less sharp than usual, but equally haunting, full of notes drawn out for so long Lan Wangji's lungs ached in sympathy. And with the sound, came ghosts. Though Lan Wangji recognized several from interactions with his betrothed through their garb, they were changed. Nails hooked and sharp like claws, hair loose and clouding

around their faces. One swooped down to pass through a puppet that had made it through Lan Yi's technique. Her eyes were dark pits, boring into Lan Wangji through the shield. The puppet dropped immediately to the ground, lying motionless and the ghost dove away into a new target.

It was not long before all the puppets fell.

In the aftermath, Jin Guangshan offered stiff congratulations to Wei Wuxian, who waved him off modestly. The other cultivators stepped away as he walked past. Though it was only due to the Yiling Laozu's grace that the Sunshot Campaign had made it this far, they only feared him more.

"Are you all right, Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian was untouched, but still red-eyed. The cut of his robes broadened his shoulders and he twirled Chenqing lazily, disciples pausing in their post-battle tasks to watch his passage.

"I am uninjured, thanks to their assistance." Lan Wangji gestured at Mianmian and Jin Zixuan.

"You've really mastered those techniques, all of you." Wei Wuxian said, as he looked Lan Wangji over for injuries and permitted him to do the same.

"Thank you," Mianmian said.

"I think we're going to go be elsewhere," Jin Zixuan said. "Oh look, some of our disciples who *actually* didn't bother to learn the shield technique properly. We should go help them get to the healers."

He dragged Mianmian away, granting Lan Wangji one brief, peaceful moment to stare into Wei Wuxian's eyes before reality came crashing down, and Xiongzhong continued to discover his previously unseen temper.

"It's one thing to turn Wen Ruohan's puppets against him, but using ghosts to fight?" Xiongzhong sounded exactly like Shufu, when one of his students suggested something just slightly out of line. "The ghosts of *our* people?"

"Would you have preferred I twiddled my thumbs while they overran you?" Wei Wuxian demanded, a haughty tilt to his head. "If you have another solution, by all means. Enlighten me."

"The deceased must be treated with respect and properly laid to rest, not forced to battle at your whim." Xiongzhong stepped into Wei Wuxian's space, using his full height to his advantage.

"My whim," Wei Wuxian laughed darkly, and the unhinged increase in frequency did not help his case. He bumped the end of Chenqing lightly against Xiongzhong's chest. "Why don't you perform inquiry yourself if you're so worried about the rights of the dead?"

Despite Xiongzhong's obvious discomfort with a weapon of demonic cultivation touching him, he did not step back either. "I cannot. As we speak, my disciples are laying them to rest."

Several swear words flashed through his mind with Jiang Wanyin's particular emphasis.

"Laying them to — they didn't *want* to rest, not until the sun falls from the sky." Wei Ying put pressure on Chenqing, forcing Xiongzhong to step back. "Do you understand how badly you could handicap this campaign, if we're attacked again before Qishan? Directly manipulating resentful energy at the levels necessary to defeat an army like *that* would make me a danger to everyone here!"

"Or would it just make you a danger to yourself?"

Wei Wuxian threw up his arms, disengaging. "I don't think Lan Zhan would like it very much if we fought. I'll see you both when Wen Ruohan is dead."

As Wei Wuxian passed close by his side, Lan Wangji reached out to squeeze his arm briefly. Wei Wuxian flashed him a tiny, uncertain smile, and then he was gone.

"Xiongzhong, he wasn't lying," he said, bearing Xiongzhong's typical post-battle scrutiny. Xiongzhong was so much more protective now than ever before. The indoctrination, his time missing, the war — they had all taken their toll. Reassuring Xiongzhong of his physical well-being was the least he could do amid the mental turmoil he caused him.

Xiongzhong would not interfere with Wei Wuxian mid-battle, Lan Wangji was certain, and they were only days away from Nightless City. But Xiongzhong was reacting before he thought often these days, and it was Lan Wangji's turn to ground him, as Xiongzhong had done for him many times in the past.

"Ah, Wangji, maybe I shouldn't have," Xiongzhong admitted. "But how do we know he's telling the truth? Or that when I offer an alternative to your marriage, he won't turn around and conquer us all? He could easily do it. If we win, all the sect leaders will be in one place, surrounded by thousands of ghosts and fallen puppets with no guarantee.

"An... alternative. To my marriage." Absolutely not.

"Binding our sects in an alliance could have the same effect —"

"No." Not only would such an agreement be counterproductive toward convincing Jin Guangshan and other sect leaders of the Yiling Laozu's lack of military intent, it would also take Lan Wangji from Wei Wuxian's side, leaving him to face whatever came next with only Wen Qing at his side. Lan Wangji could not countenance such a thing.

"Wangji..."

Avoiding Xiongzhong's stricken expression, Lan Wangji paused to consider his words. "If you would like a guarantee, agree to my marriage on the condition of custody of the Yin Iron

until rest has been played for all the ghosts in Nightless City, and all the bodies are burned. He will agree.”

Even if he should not.

“You’re determined to go through with this.”

Again, Lan Wangji wished he could let his brother see how much he wanted this. He set his jaw, and nodded.

Xiongzhong sighed. “I won’t stop you if you’re so determined. But I’m still concerned for you. That technique you led our disciples in today is... violent, Wangji. Where did you learn it?”

“Lan Yi passed the knowledge on to me.” That was the extent of what he was free to share.

“I thought she only had enough time to hand you the Yin Iron before she passed. Though it does seem to share roots with her other techniques.” Xiongzhong wiped a hand across his forehead, staring blearily at the scene around them, as Jiang disciples shot burning arrows into the bodies on the field. “Nevermind, let’s get some rest while we can.”

The tide turning, the remaining Wen armies pulled back into Nightless City. Yet the greatest battle was yet to come.

Any day Wen Qing did not have to perform surgery while seeing double was a good day. She could no longer remember her last good day. Probably that hazily remembered evening where she’d landed in Mianmian’s tent, where she’d fallen asleep to a vague sense of disappointment that nothing had happened.

It was better that it hadn’t.

Wei Wuxian might have let himself get dragged into marrying a man who would learn to hate him, but Wen Qing would not make the same mistake. She wouldn’t marry *anyone*, much less a disciple of a sect that would kill her family if it could. To steal her knowledge, perhaps, but that would only be an excuse.

*Who said anything about marriage?* A voice that sounded suspiciously like Mianmian said.

She turned around, and Mianmian was there.

Ah. She’d spoken her thoughts aloud. Maybe if she pretended Mianmian wasn’t there she would not be lectured about taking care of herself, and could continue tending the patients who needed her. It was a task of greater difficulty on the road with the patients loaded into covered carts than when they had been camped in one place. Wounds opened when they were jostled, and the number of patients had piled up after the last battle. But they could not remain behind, for no able-bodied warriors could be spared and a field hospital would only be a target. Besides, their limited doctors and field medics would be needed once the field cleared and the battle came to an end, assuming there was anyone left to treat.



There would be, she was certain.

No one knew what Wei Wuxian was capable of better than Wen Qing.

“Last I checked, even immortals sleep.” Mianmian said, worry mixed with a touch of amusement. “And Qing-jie, you’re not immortal.”

“I could be. You don’t know,” Wen Qing dropped to her knees by the nearest pallet, grasping for where a hand should be, to take the patients’ pulse, and found nothing. “There’s no one else who can help these patients.”

“Teach me how.”

Wen Qing frowned. “You’re not a healer.”

“Neither is Wei Wuxian,” Mianmian pointed out.

She had a point there, but Wen Qing said, “You’re not Wei Wuxian,” just to be contrary, because sleeping was the last thing Wen Qing had time for.

Mianmian rolled her eyes, somehow fond despite Wen Qing’s deliberate effort to increase her natural abrasiveness. “I don’t think that I can do it because Wei Wuxian can do it. I’m not that arrogant. But our levels of spiritual power is similar, and it can’t just be you and a half dozen colleagues when this is all finally over and we’ve taken Nightless City.” — a fact that Wen Qing had been trying hard not to think about — “If you can teach this technique to me, it can be taught to others.”

“*If* we’ve taken Nightless City,” She corrected. Despite her own confidence, it would not pay to be arrogant.

“If.” Mianmian agreed. “Will you teach others what needs to be done, Qing-jie? *After* you’ve gotten some sleep. You can’t go on like this.”

Wen Qing shook her head, grasping for the patient’s wrist again, and again came up empty. “This patient still needs —”

“Qing-jie, that’s an empty pallet,” Mianmian said, and Wen Qing blinked, looking down. That would explain why she had not been able to find an arm.

Mianmian put a hand on her shoulder, as though she were something delicate, and not a terror forged in the fires of Qishan. “It’s time to sleep. For my sake. Please.”

How dare Mianmian assume her importance when Wen Qing refused to acknowledge it? How dare it work? On the mountain, with the war so far away, it had seemed a trifling matter to reciprocate. Mianmian would give it up when there were battles to be fought and more people their age. It would hurt no one, if Wen Qing admired her muscles, guided her hands in a useful darning technique. Mianmian would come away with new skills and only Wen Qing’s heart would be broken.

But Mianmian had not grown bored of her.

Wen Qing didn't know how to make her *stop*.

A wave of dizziness rushed over her when she stood. She stumbled backward, and Mianmian caught her by the waist. Not trusting her legs, Wen Qing wrapped her arms around her neck.

Mianmian's lips were very close, bitten and dry from the perils of the campaign, just as Wen Qing's were, yet more tempting than ever. They might both be dead tomorrow, and for a moment the consequences of what would happen if they weren't ceased to matter.

She surged up to kiss her. Mianmian was warm and salty to the taste, like she had taken care of herself on the road to Qishan as few others had. As Wen Qing herself had not, though Mianmian kissed her back and did not pull away. If they could have met under other circumstances, Wen Qing would have taken her time exploring every corner of her mouth, rather than just giving in to temptation for one long moment where her dizziness was as much desire as it was physical.

But reality crashed back in, and Wen Qing pushed herself out of Mianmian's arms, only to stumble as her heel hit the pallet. Mianmian caught her again. "I'm sorry, I — I shouldn't have done that."

"I'm not complaining." They must have kissed for longer than Wen Qing had realized, for Mianmian's lips were reddened and swollen. Wen Qing could not look at them, for risk of diving back in and ruining everything.

"It was a mistake, I'm sorry. We can't."

"Is it the war? I thought..."

Mianmian's confusion made her heart ache with guilt. Wen Qing looked away, and the world spun around her again.

Mianmian did not push. Wen Qing almost wished she would, so it would be easier to stay away.

"Consider this conversation on hold. Right now, I'm going to put you in your bedroll and make sure you stay there. I'll ask the laundry women to make sure you do, even if they have to sit on you. Clearly the other doctors can't be trusted either."

Mianmian lifted her up by the knees, cradling her like something precious.

Wen Qing closed her eyes, and the next thing she knew Jiang Yanli was sitting by her bedroll, mending a tear in a sheet. The cart was in motion, lit through fabric by a sun high overhead. She must have passed out the moment her feet left the ground.

"Oh, you're awake!" Jiang Yanli said. "Mianmian said I'm not to let you up until you've eaten a full meal and taught the impatient doctor over there your stabilization technique."

How deeply she wished she deserved someone like Mianmian.

“And then we’ll all be needed,” Jiang Yanli continued, “It looks like the battle of Nightless City is coming to an end.”

The flap over the cart door opened, revealing the stark landscape of the city she had grown and learned in, only to turn her back without a single regret. Ghosts swarmed over it, their focus narrowed to a single target.

The secret passage into Nightless City ran across the side of the volcano, over trails of lava that could only be passed by sword flight. Lan Wangji thought it must be the Hell of the Mountain of Fire reflected on the human plane. He kept one eye on their progress, searching out the traps Wen Qing had detailed, the other on Wei Wuxian.

Xiongzhong had not been pleased when Lan Wangji volunteered to join his betrothed in the small contingent aimed toward Wen Ruohan himself, but he could not deny it was where he would be most useful. Even as they made their way across the treacherous landscape, Wei Wuxian had to play constantly to maintain contact with the sheer number of ghosts that swarmed over Nightless City in a dark cloud. Who better to defend him than his betrothed?

They were otherwise accompanied by Jiang Wanyin and his contingent of Yu disciples, for Jin Guangshan had decided their infiltration was a gamble upon which he was not willing to risk his heir, despite all prior evidence to the contrary.

The first trap sent lava spraying upward, and a Yu disciple was caught in it. He managed a very short scream before his body melted away. Jiang Wanyin gulped, turning green in the face, and Lan Wangji’s stomach tumultuously agreed. After, they proceeded with greater caution, though several more disciples met a similar fate.

The Palace of Sun and Flame was certainly well-named.

The tolling of an alarm bell only made itself apparent when it was far too late to turn back.

Mianmian had been correct that Wen Ruohan would not send a large force against them if they broke in when a battle was already in progress. At least, not large in number. Wen Ruohan had sent only one person.

Wen Zhuliu.

Every cultivator’s nightmare flexed his legendary hand, looking bored as he prepared to steal away their lives’ meaning.

Let him try.

So long as Wen Ruohan’s tyranny came to an end, their lives would be a worthy sacrifice. And perhaps Wen Zhuliu might not find them such easy victims as he expected.

Wei Wuxian glanced at him, hesitating despite their agreement. They had expected soldiers and puppets, not the greatest threat short of the would-be emperor himself.

“Go,” Lan Wangji said. “I will be fine.”

Wen Zhuliu could only steal his core away if he could touch him. Lan Wangji had no intention of entering his range.

“You better make it out, Lan Zhan. I need you.” Wei Wuxian melted into shadow, reappearing beneath the archway into the palace itself. He glanced back, sparing Lan Wangji one final moment, before vanishing within. Lan Wangji was not given the chance to appreciate Wei Wuxian *needing him*.

Wen Zhuliu’s lip curled as he spun to leap after Wei Wuxian, but the snap of Zidian against his neck made him turn back. Lan Wangji hurriedly began to play. Spiritual energy began to swirl over his strings, slowly at first, then faster, like a whirlpool.

Wen Zhuliu grabbed hold of Zidian, barred his teeth, and reeled Jiang Wanyin toward him despite the electricity charring his hands. He did not even make a sound.

As Wen Zhuliu reached out to Jiang Wanyin’s chest, Lan Wangji set the energy he had collected free. It burst over Wen Zhuliu, creating a bubble around his head. He froze. Jiang Wanyin let Zidian return to its bracelet, pulling free and backing out of his reach.

Wen Zhuliu fell to his knees, clawing at his throat, the air sucked away from him with every attempted breath. It rushed toward Lan Wangji instead, blowing back his hair and robes, chilling his fingers as he continued to play.

Zidian flew past him, shocking Wen Zhuliu’s hands from his throat. With a second snap of Jiang Wanyin’s wrist, Zidian snapped his neck, taking the kill.

It would be Jiang Wanyin’s name in the history books, but that mattered little to Lan Wangji, so long as the war was won. If he must be known for something, let it be for helping those in need alongside his husband, not war.

Lan Wangji ran through the palace, meeting no one in his path. If any servants had been spared the transformation, they were in hiding. He reached the throne room just in time to see Wei Wuxian thrown through the double doors, out into the courtyard where battle raged, Wen Ruohan flying after him.

But, he realized, as Wei Wuxian rolled to his feet, wiping blood from his chin before resuming his playing, and Wen Ruohan slammed into stone in the midst of the battlefield, neither had left under their own power. A line of blue light leading to Wei Wuxian vanished from around Wen Ruohan’s wrist as he rose slowly to his feet.

The Yin Iron shot through solid stone to return to Wen Ruohan and hover above his hand. His teeth were bloody when he laughed. Every corpse on the battlefield rose at his command, making for Wei Wuxian. The puppets continued to attack the cultivators of the Sunshot campaign, blocking Lan Wangji’s path toward his betrothed, the slashing of their swords a detriment to flying toward him. There would be no good way to use his musical cultivation techniques in such a crowded space, either.

But with a flourish of notes, twelve ghosts branched off from attacking the puppets to form a ring around Wei Wuxian. He began to walk forward, the forms of his ghosts distorted as they ripped into every fierce corpse that tried to come for him. Xiongzhong was fighting back-to-back to back with Nie Mingjue and a short man who was probably Nie Mingjue's assistant, but he could spot them only due to their heights. No one else was recognizable among the clashing of swords and sabers.

Lan Wangji plunged into the fray, losing sight of Wei Wuxian as his attention was stolen by his own self defense. For every puppet he felled, one was felled by a ghost, and another took its place. But as long as Wei Wuxian played, he lived, and Lan Wangji fought on.

In the back of his mind, Lan Wangji wondered whether Wen Ruohan had drained the entire population of the palace, the city, or farther afield to produce this army. It seemed endless, spilling over past the courtyard onto a cliff's edge over which more than one of their cultivator's had fallen — a better end by far than those whose bodies turned on friends and allies.

The key of Wei Ying's song changed, assuming the discordant tone feared across the Cultivation World.

A path cleared, suddenly, as the puppets disengaged, crowding around Wen Ruohan in a sudden shift to the defense. The surviving members of the Sunshot Campaign split along an axis down the center of the courtyard, making way for the ghosts to swarm.

The ghosts swirled above his head, until they were a tornado, picking up each of the puppets surrounding Wen Ruohan and sending them flying. When the puppets landed, they did not rise again. Finally, Wen Ruohan stood alone and afraid, his attempts to steal the ghosts from Wei Wuxian's control, the only source of resentment remaining, doing nothing more than distorting the edges of the tornado.

Wei Wuxian did not gloat in his victory, continuing to play as the ghost tornado collapsed down over Wen Ruohan's head. Only then did he lower Chenqing, and the ghosts vanished as one. Only Lan Wangji was close enough to see the way Wei Wuxian's hands shook.

Wen Ruohan fell to the ground, a hollowed and charred husk.

Lan Wangji did not run, and Wei Wuxian did not faint, but he did leap to catch his betrothed before he could fall. A thin trail of blood was already drying on Wei Wuxian's lip. "Hey, Lan Zhan. Is it time for our bows already?"

Wei Wuxian was clearly disoriented, not excited, so Lan Wangji transferred a bit of his spiritual energy rather than reply. And of course, it was hardly necessary. After only a moment, Wei Wuxian straightened, stepping out of his arms, the picture of health. Every bit the Yiling Laozu, ready to claim his reward.

The three pieces of Yin Iron lay where Wen Ruohan had fallen. Xiongzhong strode forward, an open box in his hands, his hands wrapped in layers of talisman-laden cloth to avoid contamination. He watched Wei Wuxian carefully as he walked, but the Yiling Laozu was not

where his suspicions should have lain. Wei Wuxian did not take a single step toward the Yin Iron, but nevertheless, Xiongzhong was not the first to reach it.

Jin Guangshan picked up a piece of the Yin Iron with his bare hands.

## Chapter End Notes

Sunshot Campaign's over, wangxian can get married now

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 10

## Chapter Summary

Wedding plans?

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** slight homophobia from jgs, mentions of jin zixun hunting down wen survivors

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian's heart dropped into his stomach when Jin Guangshan picked up one of the three pieces of Yin Iron scattered near Wen Ruohan's desiccated body. He had thrown everything into combating Wen Ruohan and it was only the strength of his Golden Core and Lan Zhan's aid keeping him upright.

He did not have the energy to do it all over again.

But Lan Xichen was no more eager for Jin Guangshan to take the Yin Iron than to hand it over to Wei Wuxian, even if he did not understand how damaging a choice Jin Guangshan had just made. From now until the Yin Iron was destroyed, Jin Guangshan would be connected to it, drawn to it. Something told Wei Wuxian he did not have A-Ma's resilience in resisting its call.

"Jin-zongzhu is aware of the agreement made with the Yiling Laozu," Lan Xichen said, holding out his talisman-lined box.

"Of course, of course. Here you go, Zewu-jun. Now that the Sunshot Campaign has been won, this must be set aside for the Yiling Laozu." Jin Guangshan dropped the piece of Yin Iron to which he was now bound inside.

With a gracious smile Wei Wuxian was mostly sure was fake, Lan Xichen set the box on the ground, and carefully moved the remaining two pieces into the box with his protective wrappings. He sealed it shut, and a weight lifted from Wei Wuxian's shoulders.

"Shall we discuss the odds and ends among ourselves? Zewu-jun, Chifeng-zun, and myself, of course." Jin Guangshan said, and as if just noticing their presence, added, "Ah, there are matters to be discussed involving the Yiling Laozu and Hanguang-jun as well, please join us."

“Is Jiang Wanyin not also a leader of a Great Sect?” Wei Wuxian asked, though he suspected the answer — Jiang Cheng was already bound to Jin Guangshan, through the engagement of Jiang Yanli to his son, and through his need for support during the rebuilding of Lotus Pier and the Jiang Sect.

“We can use the throne room for our discussion.” Jin Guangshan pretended not to hear him and turned on his heel.

Lan Xichen waved over a disciple, instructing her to find several of her fellows to guard it in a ‘designated place’ of which they were to inform no one.

As Wei Wuxian forced his legs to follow them inside, he struggled to remember why he could not just collapse into Lan Zhan. It was the knowledge that this was already too much contact for Lan Zhan’s taste, not the necessity of pretending to invulnerability, that kept him from giving in.

All told, the damage was much less than Wei Wuxian had expected. There were plenty of puppets to burn, but the majority of casualties on their side had occurred before his arrival on the field. The medics, Jiang Yanli included, were already running across the field, carrying stretchers and bandages, their hands shielded by gloves.

A few dozen Wen Cultivators had been captured, kneeling on the edge of the battlefield under the guard of Jin Zixuan’s cousin, whose name Wei Wuxian could never remember.

He had not gotten a good look at the throne room earlier, too busy fighting Wen Ruohan to pay the décor much attention. It was a dark, gloomy space lined with unlit braziers, and Jin Guangshan made him walk all the way to the foot of the throne before turning back with the worst smile Wei Wuxian had ever seen under his two-part mustache.

Fortunately, there was a pillar nearby for him to lean on, so he did not give himself away completely in relying on Lan Zhan. Even better, it let him lurk out of the circle formed by the others.

“Now that the war has ended, we have decisions to make, messes to clean, spoils to divide,” Jin Guangshan began, far too jovially for minutes after the end of a devastating war. “Some of Qishan’s treasure will go toward rebuilding the Cloud Recesses, Lotus Pier, and other decimated sects of course.”

“Of course.” Lan Xichen said. There was not so much as a tic in his smile, but Nie Mingjue’s expression showed the appropriate amount of rage in his stead. Lan Xichen put a hand on his arm to stop him from speaking out.

“It’s a pity Qishan is so far from Lanling, all this territory... and none of the other sects have the resources remaining to control it.” Jin Guangshan sighed faux-mournfully.

“If you’re saying you want your branch clans to set up out here, we can’t stop you,” Nie Mingjue grumbled. Though his sect had not suffered as much as others, not a single remaining sect was a match for Lanling Jin. Jin Guangshan had been careful in deploying his disciples. Calculatingly so.



Wei Wuxian had been part of the Sunshot Campaign for only the last few weeks, a handful of battles. If he had noticed, others certainly had. But he was perhaps the only person who *could* say something about it. And until the Yin Iron was destroyed, opposing Jin Guangshan was not to his advantage.

He must be terrifying, but consummately lacking in ambitions of expansion. A hibernating bear that should, under no circumstances, be poked with a stick.

“What an excellent idea! Some of the treasure should be reserved for their efforts, then.” Jin Guangshan clapped his hands as though this was a novel idea, and not exactly what he had been angling for. “Unless the Yiling Laozu objects, though he has already claimed his prizes.”

“I have no interest in expansion when I have yet to *found* my sect, Jin-zongzhu.” Wei Wuxian drawled as lazily as possible. Not difficult, when his tongue lay heavy and prone to slurring. It was more of a battle to keep from sounding drunk when he was all but dead on his feet. “All I want is to destroy the Yin Iron and for my betrothed to become my husband. Please, divide the spoils as you wish.”

“Excellent!” Jin Guangshan exclaimed. “We will of course be pleased to celebrate the wedding of the Yiling Laozu and Hanguang-jun tomorrow.”

Panicked, he exchanged a glance with Lan Zhan. “Tomorrow?”

Wei Wuxian had assumed...

He had assumed Lan Zhan would get to go home, if only for a short while.

That the ceremony would be held in Yiling, since Lan Zhan was marrying in, with all the trappings cutsleeve weddings from Gusu, Yiling, *and* Baoshan Sanren’s mountain. With, most importantly of all, both his grandmothers present, as well as Lan Zhan’s family. Lan Zhan deserved all of it and more.

And Jin Guangshan wanted them to take their bows in a conquered palace without so much as proper wedding robes. And Waipo couldn’t come, she couldn’t leave A-Ma, but Lan Zhan’s uncle —

Hmm.

“What better time to celebrate the wedding of two of the heroes of the Sunshot Campaign than at the banquet celebrating our victory?” Jin Guangshan did his best imitation of a benevolent, fatherly king, which more closely resembled a lecherous, corrupt magistrate. As did all of his expressions.

Looking like he was holding back the urge to empty his stomach, Lan Xichen cleared his throat. “I assumed we would follow ordinary procedures.”

For once, Wei Wuxian was grateful for Lan Xichen. He was the only one who could afford to object, as he had objected to everything regarding the Yiling Laozu since his arrival.

“I always forget the Lan have those for cutsleeves.” Jin Guangshan said like he was humoring a child. “But it’s better to have these matters over and done with, don’t you think? A little extra security *before* the Yin Iron enters Laozu’s hands.”

“Who better than Hanguang-jun to oversee the destruction of the Yin Iron, right?” Wei Wuxian hoped he sounded sarcastic. He couldn’t tell over the blood rushing in his ears.

Married.

Tomorrow.

Fuck.

Lan Xichen frowned, “Wangji?”

“Tomorrow is acceptable,” Lan Zhan said. His face was blank, but Wei Wuxian was certain he was disappointed. No one would want to get married like *this*, especially someone as private as Lan Zhan. Not to mention, the décor was somewhat... lacking.

“Now for more sober matters.” Jin Guangshan said, despite the fact that Wei Wuxian had not actually agreed. The universe’s payback for how he’d ignored Lan Xichen’s protests about the betrothal, he figured. “I assume there are no objections to executing the combatants.”

“Wait.” Nie Mingjue said. “We may have people among the captives.”

“Among the Wen, Nie-zongzhu?” Jin Guangshan asked, always insinuating.

Though he was, as always, angry, Nie Mingjue gave a level answer. “Spies, who provided us with information necessary to our victory.”

Jin Guangshan coughed and sputtered, “*You* were handling our espionage?”

It gave Wei Wuxian great pleasure to see him in disarray after he’d just metaphorically run the rest of them over with a cart loaded down with gold and iron. Good for Chifeng-zun.

“Not me.” Nie Mingjue scoffed. “Meng Yao handled it on our end.”

And at that, Jin Guangshan smiled, his mood lifting instantly. That couldn’t be good. “Is that the young man who saved my son? I heard a very interesting rumor about him. My long-lost son rescued my first born heir! What a wonderful story to crown the campaign, the stuff legends are made of. And such a capable administrator would find a place for himself as the newly acknowledged son of the Chief Cultivator, I suspect.”

Oh. Fuck. Exactly what Meng Yao wanted, and a devastating blow to the Nie if he accepted. Which — Wei Wuxian had not spoken to him much, but he couldn’t see a reason why he wouldn’t.

Neither could Nie Mingjue, who bristled. “He is a very capable assistant. I am not willing to give him up.”

“We’ll have to leave that up to him,” Jin Guangshan was entirely confident Meng Yao’s choice.

“Did Wen Ruohan’s will name you Chief Cultivator, Jin-zongzhu?” Wei Wuxian asked. Arrogant of Jin Guangshan to just assume he’d be the next Chief Cultivator — but then, Nie Mingjue was the only other person in a position to take it, and he never would.

“Who else would you suggest? Yourself?” Already, Jin Guangshan tried to catch him in nonexistent ambitions of empire, caught himself in the fallacy that others must share his ambitions. When Wei Wuxian had needed to be bullied into founding a small — and it *would* be small — sect.

“No. It merely seemed quite the unilateral declaration,” Wei Wuxian realized he did not currently possess the dexterity to twirl Chenqing halfway through a spin, and caught it in his hand before it could go bouncing across the floor. “After recent events.”

“There are formalities to go through, of course, but I do not expect to face any opposition. I suggest you focus on your impending nuptials.”

Patronizing asshole.

“Oh, I’d be delighted.” He would not be delighted. “Just one more thing. Refugees will be accepted in Yiling.”

Wei Wuxian pushed off the pillar — his knees, thankfully, held — and left without another word.

Meng Yao felt like he was dreaming as he directed the surviving Nie disciples — those that would listen to him at least — in cleaning up the battlefield alongside the diminished ranks of the Jiang. Part of his mind was calculating, determining the least disruptive way to extract his and Nie Huaisang’s informants from among the captured Wen. The most adept of them had likely hidden among the city’s remaining populace — a portion of which did remain, hidden in their houses.

Until the end, Wen Ruohan had not believed he could be defeated, and there was no point in an empire of corpses.

At the first opportunity, he would have to send out birds to gather those informants. Meng Yao did not trust that the populace would remain free and alive long enough to become refugees or rebuild. His father was not the sort to let a resource go unexploited. The informants hidden in town — and the two he spotted among the captive cultivators undoubtedly slated for execution — needed to be extracted immediately.

Simple enough.

Meng Yao retrieved an ink stick from his sleeve and wet it with a bit of water from his canteen. Concealing the ink stick in the palm of his hand, and walked right up to them. “Nie-

zongzhu has ordered me to retrieve several of the prisoners for interrogation.”

The disciples standing guard sneered at him. “Yeah, well Jin-zongzhu ordered us to guard them, so run along little bastard.”

“Your Jin-zongzhu is not Chief Cultivator yet. Already so arroga—” Meng Yao pretended to trip over his own feet as he stepped forward, using his stumble to swipe the ink stick across the guard’s hand, leaving a dark trail to match the ichor that stained their robes, for they had not bothered to shuck the outer layer for safety, unlike everyone else.

The guards laughed mockingly, clapping each other on the back.

Meng Yao let them laugh for a count of three before he screamed.

“What is it now, bastard?” The guard he’d pranked rolled his eyes.

“P-p-p-puppet!” He faked a stutter, pointing down at the guard’s smeared hand. “You must have missed a cut!”

Instant panic. The guard began shaking his hand and whacking at it, as the others shrieked and backed away.

Meng Yao worked quickly. His informants — three in total — made an agreed-upon sign with bound hands, and Meng Yao quickly picked the locks on their cuffs, handed over thin gray outer robes for them to wear, and told them to find the nearest Nie disciple and say Meng Yao sent them.

Meng Yao walked off alone, and when the Jins realized their scare had been just that, they shouted after him. If they realized later that prisoners were missing, well, could they really prove it was him?

He sent several disciples into town to retrieve any informants hiding there using drum signals to let them know it was safe to come out.

As he took just a moment for himself to drink from his canteen and take stock of the situation, he was approached by the person he least understood. Jin Zixuan was visibly anxious, and being repeatedly prodded toward him by the woman who was his near constant companion. Luo Qingyang, he thought, though no one called her that.

“Hello!” Jin Zixuan said, and nothing else. Funny how Meng Yao had thought him cold; his half-brother was nothing but anxiety in human form.

“Jin-gongzi,” Meng Yao returned a much more appropriate greeting. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Luo Qingyang poked Jin Zixuan again when he just stood there wide-eyed.

“Ah, well, it’s embarrassing to say, but —” He chocked on his own tongue.

Luo Qingyang smacked him hard on the back.

“Right. Spit it out.” Closing his eyes, Jin Zixuan did just that, albeit with a certain amount of stumbling. “My — our, fuck, *our* father plans to acknowledge you for saving me and your wartime service but keep you out of the line of succession.”

Meng Yao did not know how to manage the wild clashing of hope and despair his half-brother’s words stirred within him, so he just smiled and said, “Is that so?”

“We heard Jin-zongzhu ordering documents drawn up for the acknowledgment and robes found, and Zixuan thought you should know.” Luo Qingyang explained, and in the time-honored tradition of friends everywhere, added, “I bullied him into going through with it,” for the express purpose of embarrassing hers.

Jin Zixuan flushed the same vibrant shade as whenever Jiang Yanli looked in his direction.

Meng Yao covered his involuntary smile with his hand. “My thanks to you, Luo-guniang. And Jin-gongzi.”

Jin Zixuan immediately found something else to worry about. “You can call me — am I older or younger than you? I don’t —”

“We were born on the same day. I was early in the morning.” The implications were terribly awkward for Jin Guangshan. Meng Yao assumed he would want to pretend the illegitimate son was the elder for optics, but pretending to be a year or so younger was hardly the worst insult he expected to receive among the Jin.

Keeping him out of the line of succession — likely by pushing him to the bottom of it, by naming him of the previous generation — now that was a calculated insult he would be reminded of every day of his life. Every time anyone said his name.

Well played, Fuqin. Well played.

“Late afternoon.” Jin Zixuan’s mind belatedly caught up with his mouth. “The same day? Of the same year?”

“Jin-zongzhu threw me down the steps on my birthday as well as yours, yes.”

“What?”

Oh. He hadn’t known. Maybe getting to know one family member wouldn’t be *too* horrible, if he accepted the offer. Even if that family member was a brother who was fatally naive.

...If?

Since when had he considered *not* joining the Jin Sect, if offered the opportunity?

Since the captain was killed, and the disciples in the Nie Sect finally learned to give him a scrap of respect, perhaps. Or since he had gained the trust of two men who were both powerful and *good*, and if he accepted, Nie Mingjue’s, at least, would be all too easy to lose.

Meng Yao liked the person he had become. It was probable he would not like who he became in seeking his father's approval.

Jin Guangyao. Not Ziyao. Guangyao.

But he couldn't turn it down.

Could he?

"My name is fine." Though his memory was excellent, Meng Yao couldn't think of a family term he would want to be called.

"Yao-ge," Jin Zixuan said at the same time, "Oh, sorry! It's just, I've always wanted an older brother."

In fantasies of *not* being the heir to Lanling Jin, he suspected. "Yao-ge will do."

The silence quickly grew awkward, and Luo Qingyang just smiled, proud of herself.

Rightfully so, he supposed. But it would be nice if she could do him another favor and end this conversation.

"May I speak to Meng Yao for a moment?"

Meng Yao spun on his heel to find Lan Xichen, startlingly tall as always, behind him.

"Oh, Zewu-jun." It was a testament to how disturbed he was that he had not noticed Lan Xichen's approach.

Jin Zixuan and Luo Qingyang bowed, and retreated. Thank the heavens.

"I've told you not to call me so formally. Dage finally got you to call him Dage, why not me?" Lan Xichen teased.

Meng Yao smiled, genuine, the way Lan Xichen had a talent for dragging out of him. "I am still deciding what term of address suits you best. Until then, Zewu-jun."

He was deeply gratified when Lan Xichen laughed. "I suppose that's fair enough." He sobered. "You may have noticed Dage is in a mood."

Meng Yao arched a brow.

"Your father intends to legitimize you." Lan Xichen said, and he laughed.

At Lan Xichen's look of confusion, Meng Yao clarified. "Jin-gongzi just told me, in fact."

Lan Xichen tilted his head, seeing to the core of him. "You seem uncertain."

When it did not have to do with the fact that his little brother was in love with a too-powerful man who might or might not be the embodiment of evil on Earth, Lan Xichen was extremely perceptive. But his brother was his blind spot, and either he'd figure it out when Hanguang-

jun and the Yiling Laozu turned into giddy newlyweds with no sense or propriety, or Lan Wangji would eventually figure out how to tell him.

Meng Yao certainly wasn't going to be the one to explain the body language that had clued him in. Though Nie Mingjue was ordinarily a proponent of honesty even at the most unwise of times, they had a tacit agreement not to tell Lan Xichen. There were some things you just shouldn't know about family.

"It's all I ever wanted. And yet, the more I see of my father, the less I like him." Somehow, being tossed down the stairs on his father's orders had not been enough to instill hate, merely a festering hunger only soothed in the presence of a few. Going to war while Jin Guangshan sat back comfortable in his tent, only to insult everyone Meng Yao cared about between battles for their failure to counter an unknown force he did not dare to face himself, was another story entirely.

"If I may offer an alternative. Dage has promised to aid in the rebuilding of the Cloud Recesses personally. If you accompany him, musical cultivation is a powerful aid for those who begin formal cultivation training later in life. One of our elders, in fact, was self-taught until he joined the sect around your age."

That sounded — incredible. But Meng Yao had never learned to believe in offers without strings.

"Perhaps Zewu-jun merely does not wish for me to advise Jin-zongzhu." Meng Yao suggested.

"That would certainly be a benefit." Lan Xichen admitted. "Dage and I value you and your advice."

More than his father ever would. And though he wanted his father's love, for his mother, Meng Yao would never like him. Not the way he did these two men who respected him for his abilities, and for as much of himself as he could bear to show. And yet. "Please forgive me for needing time to consider."

"Of course. I know how much you wanted this." Lan Xichen, too benevolent, smiled, and left Meng Yao alone with his thoughts.

His progenitor emerged from the palace with his chest puffed out and beckoned for a group of Jin disciples that had just been standing around with a box-laden cart, doing nothing to assist. Jin Guangshan's robes were immaculate; he had not fought, merely stepped in at precisely the right moment to claim spoils.

It was not so long ago that Meng Yao had craved that sort of power, to have others willingly take risks for him, to never have to dirty his hands again. The Meng Yao of the present tamped down on whispers of cowardice, though thoughts of other sorts of power remained. He could achieve as much, if not more, as the adviser and confidant of two leaders of Great Sects as in jostling for a place at his father's ear.

What mattered was the offer. His mother had wanted him acknowledged, but she had also wanted him to become a powerful cultivator. It would not be to Jin Guangshan's benefit to further his bastard's education. If he set aside the offer of one to achieve the other, his mother's wishes would be satisfied.

The question was, which option could his pride bear to sacrifice?

Lan Wangji chanced upon his wedding robes while wandering the streets of Nightless City, playing Rest to speed his brother's requirements for the Yin Iron along. Or at least, that had been his intention.

In practice, Lan Wangji drove off three groups of Jins intent on looting, one of which was led by Jin Zixun himself. He caught Jin Zixun in the act of dragging a young couple out of their tailor shop by the hair, confronted him, and gave the couple his promise that there was space for them in Yiling, if they were so inclined.

Who was he to offer the sanctuary of the Yiling Laozu, they asked, and when he admitted his impending nuptials, excitedly handed over two sets of plain wedding robes they kept on hand in case of rushed weddings. The embroidery on the hems was complete, but they would not be able to do more elaborate work, for which they apologized. Jin Zixun had trashed their workshop before Lan Wangji's arrival, and the gold thread was tangled and dirty on the ground. But the robes had been made large with the intention to be altered, and should approximately fit two tall young men.

Lan Wangji thanked them, and assured them that he was very grateful to have wedding robes at all. If not for them, he would have nothing appropriate to wear. It might not be what Lan Wangji had dreamed of, but neither was getting married in front of the entire Cultivation World, without Shufu there to serve tea. It mattered, so long as he married Wei Wuxian.

Word spread among the survivors of the Yiling Laozu's offer even after Lan Wangji returned to the palace to prepare for his wedding. Other Lan disciples took his place patrolling the streets and the nearby woods, but Lan Wangji knew they did not save everyone.

Nightless City would be a ghost town empty even of ghosts when the Sunshot Campaign departed.

The robes did not quite fit Lan Wangji, though the other set was a near-perfect match for Wei Ying to his estimate. The laundresses were able to make quick alterations by draping the inner layer over him. As a consequence, Lan Wangji was unable to flee Xiongzhang's last minute worries.

"You were raised to believe sacrifice is expected of you, and love is dangerous." Xiongzhang mused as he watched him sadly. That was true in a way, given their parents' example, but no one had ever been able to tell him *why* their mother had killed their father's teacher. Perhaps their father had asked the truth and taken the only option available — but Lan Wangji had handled too many cases involving false accusations by those in power to take it as a certainty.



And he had witnessed happy couples around the Cloud Recesses and on his solo travels, while Xiongzhong was always surrounded by his own people.

If one of them believed love was dangerous, it was Xiongzhong.

Xiongzhong continued, "I'm so sorry. There are Lans with more than one partner, at the same time or successively, though I know you've always believed in the legend. Someday, you'll be able to be with her, I promise."

"...What?" Lan Wangji had never been more confused in his life. Including when he had woken up to find the scourge of the Cultivation World was the kindest, most beautiful man in the world and when he found out his long deceased many times great-aunt was alive.

"I know you're in love with that girl." Xiongzhong said, and when Lan Wangji only stared at him blankly, added, "Luo Qingyang."

While Lan Wangji's mind attempted to jump through a long series of hoops to figure out how anyone might think he was in love with *Mianmian*, Xiongzhong continued to speak about his so-called options. Finally, he recalled there *had* been whispers that he had saved Mianmian in the Xuanwu's cave because they were involved, to which he had paid little mind.

Lan Wangji blurted out, "Xiongzhong, I am not interested in women," interrupting him.

"Oh." Xiongzhong blinked, going through a similar reorganization of his thoughts. "Well, neither am I. That doesn't mean you have to marry the Yiling Laozu."

But he wanted to marry the Yiling Laozu.

"Remember, Wangji, you can always come home," Xiongzhong said. "I *will* find a way to get you out of this."

"That will not be necessary, Xiongzhong." It was sweet of him to worry, Lan Wangji supposed, so long as he stopped thinking Mianmian was involved. Even a bit amusing now that his wedding was definitely happening. Though thankfully Lan Wangji was not the type to laugh in his brother's face. "Wei Wuxian treats me well."

"There's something you're not telling me." Xiongzhong frowned, searching his face for hints. "Why do I feel like it would change everything?"

Lan Wangji remained silent. Xiongzhong would understand when he visited Yiling, he was certain, but Xiongzhong was too frightened of his betrothed's abilities to see the truth now.

Xiongzhong continued to stare at him mournfully until the laundress finished her alterations, and Lan Wangji was freed to go lock himself in a free bedroom for the night.

Wei Wuxian was tearing his hair out. He was getting married tomorrow. Him. To Lan Zhan.

He was both the luckiest man in the world, and the worst.

And he had nothing but time to dwell on it.

After the meeting, he'd needed to collapse for a while, and woken still tired but refreshed enough to help stabilize last few puppet-infected patients. There were fewer than he expected, and once the physicians finished treating the handful of ordinary patients, they were free to follow Wen Qing's directives to slowly separate the poison in the infected patients' veins from their meridians. Leaving behind spiritual energy that might never fully recover, depending on how quickly the patient had stabilized, but would at least be theirs.

Wei Wuxian would not be permitted to perform the same trick he and Lan Zhan had used to save the one cultivator again, he was informed, just before he was summarily removed from the physicians' way. It would endanger Lan Zhan, they said, and really, he should be resting up for his wedding.

He couldn't argue with the first part. But preparing for his wedding was exactly what he wanted to avoid.

Fortuitously, Wen Qing was also kicked out not long after.

"You let them know you're not immune to bodily needs once, and they think they can boss you around," she grumbled, assuming he was waiting for her without checking.

Wen Qing fell into step with him as he informed her they were forcing Lan Zhan to marry him sooner than they'd all expected.

"It makes sense," Wen Qing said, "Jin-zongzhu wants all the attention on what *you* might do, so no one bothers to come up with an objection while *he* consolidates his power."

Wen Qing was, of course, correct.

When it did not relate to her own wellbeing, she usually was. All the other scions of Great Sects he'd met — Wen Ning, Jin Zixuan, Jiang Cheng, even and especially Lan Zhan — shared that tendency. Wei Wuxian was immensely grateful he had not been born into one. With his natural inclinations, he probably would have done something stupid, like try to wield the sword in the Xuanwu of Slaughter against Wen Ruohan. Fortunately, his grandmothers had taught him better.

Wei Wuxian opened the door to the rooms he'd claimed, and found a folded set of bright red wedding robes on his bed. There was a note in Lan Zhan's careful calligraphy on top.

*For my soon-to-be husband. I have seen to it that our lands will have new occupants soon. These robes are a gift from two of them, who were nearly victims of untrustworthy allies.*

How sweet was his betrothed? Saving the people of Nightless City before Wei Wuxian even started looking and finding appropriate wedding robes in the process. Wei Wuxian did not deserve him.

He never would, so long as there were secrets between them.

Wei Wuxian stopped himself from crumpling the paper in his fist, tucking it within his robes instead, wanting it against his skin. “Somehow, I didn’t think this would actually happen. At least not this soon.”

Wen Qing snorted, for she lived to poke fun at him. “They were never going to let you walk out of here without a guarantee.”

“When I was younger and didn’t know my own strength, Waipo said justifications are how we talk ourselves out of guilt.” Wei Wuxian had been young and eager, and had difficulty reigning himself in. But he chose to spar with others near his age a few times after his core began to blossom because it was more fun than waiting for someone stronger to have time, and injured his opponent by mistake. The first time, it had been an honest mistake. The second, he had been on pen-cleaning duties for three months. By the time his punishment ended, Wei Wuxian had thoroughly learned his lesson and smelled strongly of yak.

“You have to marry him,” Wen Qing said.

“I know.” He knew, he wanted, he needed, and it was all a terrible idea. Like he was young again, and Lan Zhan a peer he would knowingly choose to injure. Or perhaps the reverse, only Lan Zhan had no idea what he was capable of. “And I want to, I want to so badly, just like I knew I would but—”

“Are you going to tell him?” Wen Qing asked.

“How could I?” He threw himself onto the bed, scooting back toward the wall. “But you don’t have to make my mistakes. You’re not me, and Mianmian isn’t Lan Zhan. It’s my secret you’re keeping — you can tell her there is one, but it’s not yours to share. She’ll understand.”

“I can make my own mistakes, thanks.” Wen Qing sat down beside him anyway, and sighed.

Neither of them could be said to be wise in the ways of love. “You’ve been banished from working right?”

“The surviving patients are stable, and I’m not allowed to return until I’m ‘rested.’” Her head thunked back against the stone wall.

Wei Wuxian pulled a qiankun bag from his sleeve, and unloaded six jars of wine onto the sheets. He picked up one and uncorked it. “Want to get drunk on the eve of my wedding?”

Silently, Wen Qing uncorked a jar of her own and knocked it against his.

## Chapter End Notes

I'm not totally sure if I'll be able to get Chapter 11 up next week (very busy with life things), but I'll try not to make you wait too long for the wedding and smut!

And I'll also try to answer comments sometime soon, thank you for those, they're much appreciated! Hope you can forgive me for not killing off jgs now. I need him around for plot reasons but I promise his eventual demise!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 11

## Chapter Summary

An unexpected wedding blessing, a wedding night, and maybe a little plot idk

## Chapter Notes

Hello, I'm back! Extremely busy two weeks between a conference and visiting friends who live near the conference location, I thought I'd have more downtime than I did

**CW:** lwj has an anxiety-fueled wet dream where his fantasies mix with his fears, smut featuring mild undernegotiated kink (in the sense that lwj takes wwx's teasing as actual orders), scene goes from "Under other circumstances" to "Lan Zhan settled onto his chest"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Wangji arrived at his wedding feeling like his skin had been set on fire. He had tossed and turned for much of the night, in a strange bed in the palace, full of what ifs of hopes and disaster.

Would Wei Wuxian be able to see the desire shifting just beneath his skin, fulfill his needs before he even needed to express them?

What if Wei Wuxian did not want to sleep with him?

Would his husband curl into him in his sleep, and would Lan Wangji someday get used to waking up next to him?

What if someone decided to rid them all of the so-called threat of the Yiling Laozu and attempted to murder his betrothed in the middle of the ceremony?

Would they have rabbits, perhaps adopt children together some day?

What if Lan Wangji was so terrible at kissing he bit his husband's tongue, or kneed him in the crotch, or confessed his love mid-coitus?

Would he learn to share his opinions, because they mattered, because he was not 'a mature and exemplary example to his peers' when it suited the elders and 'full of the misguided idealism of youth' when it did not?

What if Jin Guangshan demanded the marriage be consummated with an audience, to prove it was real? To shame them both forever in the eyes of the world? Asking such a thing would be indecent, even for Jin Guangshan to suggest and be taken seriously, though he might very well say such a thing to his dinner companions in jest.

But his mind could not stop catastrophizing. Surely something would go wrong. He did not get to have this.

When Lan Wangji finally slept, he dreamed he was spreadeagled on a bed, hands and ankles tied to posts at the corners. Wei Wuxian, his betrothed, his new husband, rode his cock with his head thrown back, nails digging into Lan Wangji's thighs as he used them for support. A sea of faceless figures watched as he writhed under Wei Wuxian, and the feeling of their eyes on him only fueled his need. All of them knew he was Wei Wuxian's, and Wei Wuxian was his.

He woke achingly hard with his hips canting up into a sheet stained with sweat and precum, his arms pinned over his head by imagination. When he managed to convince one of his hands that it was not, in fact, tied to the bed, it took very little for him to spill into his fist.

Lan Wangji turned his face into the mattress, flushed with shame and physical satisfaction. He did not really want to be watched in bed with Wei Ying, it had been his late-night anxieties manifesting in his dreams. Yet there was something appealing about the idea, nonetheless. As if he liked the thought of being seen — or better, caught — in the act, but did not want it to actually *happen*.

It was the first time Lan Wangji had slept alone since indoctrination, the first time he touched himself since the night before he departed on his futile hunt for the Yin Iron. Part of him wished he had held out for only a few more hours, but at least he would be less likely to embarrass himself by coming at the first brush of his new husband's hand, proving just how desperate for him he was.

Though Xiongzhong helped him get ready that evening, Lan Wangji asked him to go ahead, to arrive as befitted a sect leader. Really, he needed a few moments alone to remember how to breathe. Xiongzhong's nerves were only stirring up his. Walking alone to the throne room turned banquet hall was not better, exactly, but his worries melted away when he saw Wei Wuxian waiting for him outside the doors.

He wore red, habitually, and looked beautiful in it. But this was something else entirely. Lan Wangji couldn't place the way he looked at him precisely, too many emotions colliding at once to choose a single one.

Wei Wuxian saw him and smiled and nothing else mattered. He kept smiling, until Lan Wangji reached him, at a rare loss for words as his eyes roved over his body. For which Lan Wangji was grateful. He did not think he could unstick his tongue from the rough of his mouth to pay him a compliment. No compliment could never be sufficient to describe how strikingly beautiful Wei Wuxian looked in his wedding robes.

"You look..." Wei Wuxian trailed off, and shook himself. "Are you ready?"

Lan Wangji did not see how he ever could be. But he nodded anyway, unwilling to let his betrothed read nerves as hesitance. If he was worried about their marriage, he was more frightened that if it did not happen now, it never would.

“At least one of us is,” Wei Wuxian chuckled, off balance as Lan Wangji had never seen him, sending his heart plummeting. “As fun as it is to joke that I’m carrying you off like a trophy, most of the people in there believe it.”

If Wei Wuxian would like to play a game to that effect, Lan Wangji would be far from opposed. But he was marrying his match, not his captor, and they would take on the world side by side. He put his hand on the door, glancing back at Wei Wuxian, a challenge, and they pushed the doors open together.

The eyes of the cultivation world were immediately upon them. Lan Wangji hated it already. There was Jin Guangshan, seated as close to the throne as he could contrive, already enjoying the benefits of his as-yet unofficial position, gazing over his subjects. Dishes had already been set out for the enjoyment of those assembled, and some disciples and Sect Leader Yao rudely had half-eaten plates before them. Respectful behavior had, it seemed, been too much to expect for his wedding.

At least an altar laden with the appropriate items had been set up at the foot of the throne, and just off to the side — Shufu sat at Xiongzhong’s side, looking entirely nonplussed to be there.

Lan Wangji stopped dead in his tracks, pulling on Wei Wuxian’s arm to slow him.

“Shufu?” He breathed, barely audible.

“I went to pick him up this morning, as soon as I was recovered enough to travel that far. I don’t think he likes me very much — I may have broken through the wards — but he wanted to be here for you.”

Lan Wangji stared at him, speechless, his heart swelling until he thought it would burst. It was a good thing they were about to take their bows, or he would have dragged Wei Wuxian off to the nearest temple to elope. But this would be faster, if less romantic.

And like that he found, if he just kept looking at Wei Wuxian, the stares of their unwelcome audience ceased to exist. If prior experiences held true, no one watching would be able to tell how besotted he was, though he felt it must be written on his forehead.

A surprise to Lan Wangji, an abbreviated tea ceremony came before the bows. Xiongzhong had wished to skip it. But Shufu it seemed, had decided that was unacceptable. Lan Wangji’s hands were steady as he poured the tea, though every organ within him quivered.

Shufu inclined his head and accepted his cup.

“Shufu, you can’t *approve*,” Xiongzhong whispered, low enough the rest of the room couldn’t hear.

Shufu paused with the cup halfway to his mouth. “Of his cultivation? No. Of Wangji’s husband’s respect for his elders? Yes.”

“This one will strive to be worthy of your nephew, Shufu.” Wei Wuxian bowed from the waist, as low as the table they knelt in front of would allow.

“You better.” Shufu hmphed, and turned his attention on Lan Wangji. “Wangji, I will miss you.”

“Thank you, Shufu,” Lan Wangji said. For the both of them, that was an outpouring of affection. Shufu’s approval, even half-hearted, meant the world to him. If Shufu could accept his marriage, Xiongzhong one day could too, once he saw Lan Wangji’s *husband* under better circumstances. Lan Wangji was certain of it.

Shufu frowned, squinting at him, but drank the tea.

With that, it was time.

Kneeling before the altar with his heart pounding, Lan Wangji turned to his husband and bowed.

Wei Wuxian was officially a married man. Everything and nothing had changed. Lan Zhan sat at his side, picking at his food with his chopsticks, his ears bright red as he stole glances at Wei Wuxian.

His husband, who Wei Wuxian was supposed to take back to a room that had been prepared for them and disrobe and somehow reign in all his desires.

A hint of Lan Zhan’s tongue flicked out to curve around the chopsticks, visible only because Wei Wuxian was staring unrepentantly at his lips, and he thought of that tongue laving at his cock. Lips parted around him, allowing Wei Wuxian to fuck his throat with tears welling in his eyes, helpless noises urging him on.

He had not been thinking much about Lan Zhan in this way — determinedly, and because the demands of war kept him from dwelling. Now with the war over, now they were *married*, and Wei Wuxian was not only able but *expected* to whisk Lan Zhan off for ravishment at any moment, it was impossible to think of anything else.

But he would ignore all that to give Lan Zhan what he deserved and no more than he wanted. Whether that was his mouth, a kiss, or nothing at all. Anything he could do to make this marriage as pleasant as possible for Lan Zhan.

Wei Wuxian would eagerly soak in anything Lan Zhan chose to give.

That was why when Wei Wuxian woke that morning, simultaneously refreshed and hungover, he had made himself presentable according to Lan standards — A-Ma never required such stringent etiquette of him, but she did require him to know it, and for the first time Wei Wuxian was grateful — and hauled his ass off to Gusu.



The space between life and death was almost too easy to traverse, his recent overuse unbalancing him toward resentment. After this, after the Yin Iron was destroyed, he would have to be careful for quite some time. Presence he had sensed lurking on the edge of camp once or twice aside, the war was over. One last thing, and he could rest.

The wards of the Cloud Recesses were child's play to bypass. Lan Qiren's scream when Wei Wuxian appeared in his office was more of a challenge, but Wei Wuxian had managed to explain, and the words "nephew's wedding" overpowered Lan Qiren's obvious urge to throw every one of the books stacked on his desk at Wei Wuxian's head.

Lan Qiren would not travel by demonic cultivation, of course, but Wei Wuxian did not even need to suggest it.

There had been a tree in Gusu old enough to make a portal to the mountain with his token, and from there he had been able to make another one at the far edge of the forest surrounding Nightless City. Ironical, that Wei Wuxian had somehow managed to make a better impression on Lan Zhan's hidebound uncle than his brother.

Still, Lan Qiren did nothing but fuss. Complained from first meeting until Wei Wuxian dropped him off in the throne/banquet hall.

The look on Lan Zhan's face when he saw his uncle had been more than worth all the fussing.

The same way Lan Zhan was staring at him now, eyes half-lidded, his chopsticks still in his mouth. Wei Wuxian stuffed a chunk of braised pork that was mostly fat into his mouth and sat on his hands, before he could cup Lan Zhan's chin and offer to replace his chopsticks with his fingers.

Jin Guangshan provided a distraction. When he rose from his table on the steps to the throne, the room went silent. "Congratulations to the newlyweds, Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Laozu. The long, difficult road has ended in success, and for some of us, new beginnings.

There was a brief round of polite clapping, half-hearted wishes for their health mixed in with a few loud, genuine cheers from disciples whose companions looked at them askance.

"I would like to celebrate another new beginning," Jin Guangshan continued. "My son was missing for the first three months of the Sunshot Campaign, and just after he returned to us, he was nearly torn from this life entirely by the cruel whim of fate. It is only thanks to the actions of one young man, taken at great risk to himself, that my son remains with us."

From the look on Meng Yao's face, he hadn't been expecting this — or at least, hadn't been expecting it *now*. He looked like a deer monster illuminated by sword flare in the night, moments before it was cut down.

"Not only did he save my son and heir's life, this young man also assisted greatly in managing the Yiling Laozu, among other achievements during this campaign. Imagine my surprise when I learned he is my long-lost son!" Jin Guangshan feigned delight, though even Wei Wuxian knew he had once shoved this very long-lost son down a long flight of stairs for

daring to claim their relation. “Naturally, he will be accepted into the Jin clan. Heretofore, he will be known as Jin Guangyao.”

“Way to find the most offensive way possible to acknowledge your offspring, asshole,” Wei Wuxian muttered.

Nie Mingjue looked like he wanted to pick up his table and brain Jin Guangshan with it, for which Wei Wuxian wouldn’t blame him.

Actually, he’d pay to see it. Someone who didn’t have a reputation as a bloodthirsty evil tyrant knock off Jin Guangshan for him, please. That would be an excellent wedding gift.

Finally, Meng Yao rose from his place at Nie Mingjue’s side, and bowed. “I thank you for your offer, Jin-zongzhu, but I have decided to remain with the Nie.”

In front of everyone, Jin Guangshan gaped.

“Good for him, making the right choice,” Wei Wuxian whispered in Lan Zhan’s ear. Lan Zhan had used the slightest hint of perfume, Wei Wuxian realized too late. Sandalwood, and a single breath was more intoxicating than the strongest wine.

But Lan Zhan wasn’t listening. “*Managing you.*”

“It’s amazing what treating me like a person will do for my behavior.” Wei Wuxian tried to joke, but Lan Zhan wasn’t having it.

“Managing you.” He huffed again.

There was no one in the world more adorable than his husband. His lower lip stuck out in a slight pout, and Wei Wuxian wanted to bite it. Casually, before everyone, claiming Lan Zhan as *his*.

Kissing him deeply, passionately, until Lan Zhan went pliant in his arms, before sweeping him off back to his cottage on the mountain. He’d push their beds together and lay Lan Zhan down, take him apart slowly and relentlessly, make a sobbing mess out of him. Only then would Wei Wuxian fuck him using the oil he kept in his desk. Lan Zhan would come when Wei Wuxian told him he could, and he would finish himself off onto Lan Zhan’s stomach, their cum mixing together like ephemeral, physical proof they were bound together.

If Wei Wuxian could last that long, after getting his hands on Lan Zhan. In his delusion of a daydream, they would have time to work up to it.

But Lan Zhan wasn’t truly his, though Wei Wuxian belonged to him.

Jin Guangshan seemed to have decided to pretend that incident had not happened. “We celebrate one union here today, but the celebration of another is overdue. Jiang-zongzhu, shall we set a date for the wedding?”

It was Jiang Wanyin’s turn to imitate a deer monster.

Fortunately, Jiang Yanli was more gracious than the rest of the cultivation world put together. She rose smoothly and bowed to her future father-in-law. “Marrying your son will bring me the greatest joy. However, I still have duties to my natal sect. If Jin-zongzhu would be willing to provide additional assistance in construction, perhaps in a year?”

Wei Wuxian was too far from Jin Zixuan to tell if he was drooling, but his mouth was certainly hanging open.

“Of course, your dedication to your family is admirable, Jiang-guniang, and the wedding of my heir must be a grand affair. We will begin planning your wedding for an auspicious date as close to the anniversary of our victory as possible — perhaps even the anniversary itself, should fate align.” Jin Guangshan carefully did not promise additional aid, and Jiang Yanli could not afford to press the matter.

“Thank you for your consideration, Jin-zongzhu,” she bowed again.

“Jiang-guniang,” Jin Zixuan blurted out, too loud, and startled as the attention of the room descended on him.

Jiang Yanli, still standing, startled at his direct address, after being treated as unwanted for so long, and then spoken to only when Jin Zixuan could not reasonably run away.

“...Yes, Jin-gongzi?” She asked, finally.

“May I -- May I personally offer my aid?” Jin Zixuan blushed furiously as he stuttered. And to Wei Wuxian’s surprise, Jiang Yanli smiled, and it wasn’t shy in the least.

She knew exactly what she was being offered, even if her brother did not. The assistance the Jiang Sect so needed, against Jin Guangshan’s wish to keep them down, and the devotion of her betrothed.

Patting her brother’s hand as he fumed, Jiang Yanli said, “I’m afraid we may not be able to host you in the comfort to which you are accustomed, but we would be happy to host you.”

Jin Zixuan tried to respond, and ended up biting his own tongue before he could speak. Though his father apparently had more to say, Wei Wuxian did not want to hear it.

“I think,” Wei Wuxian said, “It’s past time we made our exit.”

Lan Zhan hesitated. “They will make a fuss.”

There was no avoiding that, whenever he left. Unless —

“Shall I steal you then?” He offered, teasing, close enough to inhale him.

Looking across the room to catch his brother’s eye, Lan Zhan held out his hand well above the table, pointedly meeting his brother’s eyes at the next table over.

Wei Wuxian chuckled.

“We’ll be going now,” he announced, and took Lan Zhan’s hand. Resentment rose around them before anyone could gainsay him, swallowing them down and spitting them out in the room he had slept in the night before.

The first thing Wei Wuxian did upon entering the room was check his talismans to make sure no one had tried to leave a trap while he was gone. He found nothing, but that was less reassuring than it might have been.

A few weeks had been enough to pick up on the ways of the cultivation world, and to learn that Jin Zixuan was — unfortunately — correct about its ways. His father’s in particular. It would be a prime opportunity to assassinate him, if someone was going to, while he was assumed to be occupied with his wedding night. If no one was trying to kill him, what *else* might they have planned?

All thoughts of attempted assassinations fled his mind when he turned to find Lan Zhan bent over the mattress, inspecting it for hidden needles Wei Wuxian might have missed. But he had removed his outer robe, left it folded carefully to the side, and Wei Wuxian could see the shape of his ass clearly for the first time.

He wanted to unveil it, take a bite out of it, turn it red before burying his face between his ass cheeks.

No, he told himself.

They might be married, but he could only take as much as Lan Zhan offered. Limit the damage, when Lan Zhan came to hate him.

Lan Zhan looked up, catching him staring.

“My husband is beautiful,” he said, because it was true. A work of art, he thought — and corrected himself remembering how Lan Zhan hated to be thought of an unchangeable, untouchable statue. “Do I get to see you relaxed, now?”

Even sharing a room back on the mountain, he had never really seen Lan Zhan relaxed. It would be the greatest privilege he could imagine.

A hesitation and — shyly, Lan Zhan removed the pins from his guan. His hair came tumbling down in a cloud, crimped slightly from holding its shape for so long. He wanted to tug on the ends, pulling it straight and letting go, to earn a glare and get chased around the mountain like the younger disciples had done. Better, to see it spread beneath him on the red silk sheets, Lan Zhan blinking up at him, startled and wanting, waiting on edge to learn how Wei Wuxian would take him.

As he struggled to get his reaction under control, Lan Zhan frowned. And reached out, slowly, to poke Wei Wuxian in the gut. Wei Wuxian could have stopped him, if he thought he would actually do it.

He didn’t. Lan Zhan did. He jumped.

“You were staring.” Lan Zhan said with — oh fuck — the slightest hint of a pout.

The best way to disguise his blatant lust, Wei Wuxian decided, was teasing. “Just planning ways to devour my husband. I suggest you run.”

Games were largely unfamiliar to Lan Zhan, but after a beat of hesitation, he dodged around Wei Wuxian, sprinting for the other side of the room, encouraging him to give chase with a glance over his shoulder. Of course, when he got in reach, Lan Zhan used his own tactic to dip under grasping arms, reversing course. Finally, Wei Wuxian had to jump over the bed to catch him. He slammed his hands against the wall on either side of Lan Zhan’s head, breathing hard from giggling rather than exertion.

There was the slightest hint of a smirk on Lan Zhan’s lips, like Wei Wuxian had played right into his hands. Wei Wuxian burst into laughter anew. Incredible how this man, his husband, had tricked the world into thinking he was nothing but a serious, stodgy rule follower. He’d even tricked himself. But Wei Wuxian saw him for what he was.

Kind, caring, quietly hilarious. Mistaken for ice when he was all fire, passion burning bright, but hidden away. A powerhouse swaddled in restrictions, only just learning to win his way free.

Everything, infinite and inevitable.

“If you think this is a good way to seduce me...” Wei Wuxian leaned in as he spoke, until his nose grazed Lan Zhan’s, their lips a whisper apart.

Lan Zhan closed the gap between them, pressing his lips to his, and nothing more. Wei Wuxian froze.

“Oh.” Lan Zhan said, quietly.

Curse him for it, but Wei Wuxian could not stand for Lan Zhan to be sad. To think he didn’t want him. He cupped Lan Zhan’s jaw in his hand, tilting it up so he had just enough time for his eyes to go wide before Wei Wuxian was kissing him, everything he’d tried so hard to hold back released at once. Like a parched man offered a sip of water from a well, he dove in, knowing he could never extricate himself. His tongue slid against Lan Zhan’s, his thigh parting Lan Zhan’s to push between them.

And wonder of wonders, Lan Zhan kissed him back, whimpering softly as he hardened against Wei Wuxian’s thigh. He never wanted to stop, but he pulled back just far enough to murmur against Lan Zhan’s lips, “If you think this is a good way to seduce me, you’d be right.”

Though they were very close to the same size, Lan Zhan did his best to climb Wei Wuxian like a tree, slinging his leg around his hips, pulling hard enough on his robes they threatened to tear. Wei Wuxian removed his hands, pinning them against the wall gently so Lan Zhan could escape if he wanted, but he left them there like he’d been shackled, even as the rest of his body did its best to merge them together.

“Patience, Lan Zhan. Don’t you dare rip these.” Wei Wuxian warned. “We have eternity if we want it.”

Lan Zhan froze entirely. “We do?”

Probably not, when he could see Lan Zhan walking away without a backward glance not too far into their future. The answers he had found in the Burial Mounds, in the evil that had once resided there, had made certain of it. But that night, and any night Lan Zhan wanted him, could be its own little eternity until then.

“Where do you want to start?”

It seemed for a moment like Lan Zhan might not answer, but then, shyly, he said, “I want to see you.”

Under other circumstances, if Lan Zhan was more confident in Wei Wuxian’s interest, he would have teased. Told Lan Zhan to open his eyes, he was right there, forced him to elaborate. But for now, he let go of Lan Zhan, backed up, and hoped he could manage to disrobe without making a fool of himself.

Wei Wuxian had tied the knot in his belt in a more complex design than necessary, for the ceremony, but it was child’s play for him to untangle it. The robes went down by Lan Zhan’s, haphazardly folded, for Wei Wuxian had never learned the art of neatness.

He paused with his fingers dipped below the waistband of his pants. “My turn. Strip, let me see all of you.”

Though he likely imagined the sharp intake of breath at his demand, Lan Zhan was not to be outdone. He stripped completely, not giving Wei Wuxian enough time to absorb the planes of his chest before his cock bounced free, half-hard still from rutting against his thigh.

“Hnngh.” Wei Wuxian said. Despite extensive reading, and plenty of casually naked stream bathing, he had never actually seen someone he was attracted to naked before. Add in feelings and well, he forgot how words worked.

Lan Zhan could have come in his wedding robes, if Wei Wuxian had let him grind against him for just a little longer.

“Wei Ying?” Lan Zhan asked, uncertain and disappointed.

Right. Equivalent exchange, fair’s fair. This was an equitable marriage, Lan Zhan was not there to be stared at and he should be able to see the way Wei Wuxian’s cock filled at the sight of him. Wei Wuxian eased his pants down, stepping out of them with far less grace than Lan Zhan.

He looked up, and did not meet Lan Zhan’s eyes, for Lan Zhan was focused on one part of him, and one part of him only.

Staring at his cock with his lips parted, Lan Zhan sank to his knees, right there with only Wei Wuxian’s discarded pants to guard against the stone. And did nothing, like all he wanted was

an up-close inspection of Wei Wuxian's dick, hardening under his gaze.

“Do you ... want my cock?” He cupped Lan Zhan's jaw, his thumb stroking from the crevice at the back of Lan Zhan's jaw, forward. “Suck me off, then. What are you waiting for? Permission?”

Permission was exactly what Lan Zhan had been waiting for. He whimpered, and surged forward, grasping Wei Wuxian's thighs as he took him in his mouth. Messy and enthusiastic, he bobbed his head, and fuck, it wasn't like Wei Wuxian had practical experience to draw on either. The lid on his desires frayed as he struggled not to come from just the feeling of Lan Zhan's mouth hot and wet around him.

For the space of a moment, he lost control, thrusting into the heat of Lan Zhan's mouth. Lan Zhan moaned, swallowing around him, and Wei Wuxian came. Sudden and hard, trying to pull back as Lan Zhan held him close, swallowing around him.

Gently, he removed Lan Zhan's hands from the back of his thighs, where they'd left handprints that would be gone before Wei Wuxian gave Lan Zhan what he needed. When he pulled back, a bit of cum dribbled down Lan Zhan's chin. His tongue darted out, snatching up all of it, something like wonder in his eyes.

Vacant, blissful, wonder.

Oh.

Of all the times he'd thought about Lan Zhan like this, he had never expected reality to match his imagination.

“Good boy,” he tilted Lan Zhan's chin up to face him, stroking over his lips with his thumb. “You did so well.”

Lan Zhan melted as though Wei Wuxian's grasp on his chin was the only thing keeping him upright.

Wei Wuxian sat, tugging Lan Zhan into his lap, peppering kisses over his face. Lan Zhan made a dissatisfied sound, pushing his face away as he ground down on Wei Wuxian's thigh, seeking friction he wouldn't find with his hands clutching at Wei Wuxian's shoulders.

His hands glided over Lan Zhan's back, until they cupped his ass and squeezed. Lan Zhan's gasp turned to a startled yelp, and Wei Wuxian pulled him closer, so he could thrust against his hip.

His panting grew harsh and needy, his head tucked into Wei Wuxian's shoulder, granting him access to the point where his neck met his shoulder. Where sandalwood was replaced by the sweat of exertion. He left open mouthed kisses at first, trying to resist the urge to bite, to find out what Lan Zhan would sound like if he did. They hadn't talked — Wei Wuxian had only just realized — Lan Zhan's mental state had clearly been affected —

“Can I leave a mark?”

Lan Zhan nodded into his shoulder. “Yes, yes, yes, *please*.”

One, then, just one, below the high line of Lan Zhan’s usual collars. He sucked hard on that spot, only to realize how sensitive it was when Lan Zhan’s teeth sank into his shoulder.

Wei Wuxian pressed down on Lan Zhan’s hips, stilling their movement. When Lan Zhan released his grip to glare, he said, “I didn’t say you could do that. If you need something in your mouth so badly, you can have my fingers. Can you be good?”

Lan Zhan nodded frantically, so Wei Wuxian eased up on his hips, removing one hand entirely to press his first two fingers against lips that readily took him in.

“No teeth,” he warned, whispering low against Lan Zhan’s ear as he wrapped his hand around Lan Zhan’s cock. “Or I stop.”

Wei Wuxian wasn’t opposed to Lan Zhan biting him, but *he* hadn’t asked for permission.

It was over very quickly after that, Lan Zhan spilling over his hand after a handful of strokes. Wei Wuxian eased him through it, removing his fingers only when Lan Zhan stopped shaking.

Lan Zhan settled onto his chest, sighing in contentment. Wei Wuxian combed his fingers through his hair, humming as Lan Zhan drifted off to sleep.

The rhythm of his breathing was distracting at first, but as Wei Wuxian watched his husband sleep, his own fell into sync.

He stirred when Lan Zhan rolled off of him. Reaching out for his missing heavy blanket, he accidentally smacked Lan Zhan in the chest. His sharp exhale brought Wei Wuxian awake all at once.

The way Lan Zhan looked at him alone was too much to handle, and then he said, “Good morning, Wei Wuxian,” with a voice still rough from cock-sucking, and Wei Wuxian combusted.

*Good morning, Lan Zhan*, he meant to say. And instead, “You should call me Wei Ying. Husband privileges.”

“Wei Ying. Husband.” A small smile played across Lan Zhan’s lips.

Beautiful. He couldn’t bring himself to regret letting Lan Zhan that much closer. Not now.

One crisis averted, but now Wei Wuxian would have to survive his husband calling him by his birthname. “Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan. How did I get this lucky?”

Lan Zhan looked away. “I was not certain whether you would sleep with me.”

“You wanted this to be a real marriage,” he said, confused. It had always been Lan Zhan’s choice whether to sleep with him. Wei Wuxian had been more than willing all along.



Lan Zhan still did not look at him. “Yes, I did.”

Wei Wuxian had said something wrong, but he didn’t know what, or how to fix it.

“Disappointing first time?” He asked, nervous now, that he had misread everything.

That, at least, made Lan Zhan look. “No.”

“Mm, I’m glad,” Wei Wuxian said, too sleepy, floating too high on the afterglow to focus for long.

Lan Zhan twined their fingers together, a single link between them. “You were — I — I know we are not in love but —”

Wei Wuxian knew that too, or at least that Lan Zhan was not in love with him. The unrequited state of Wei Wuxian’s feelings was the best-case scenario. But it still broke his heart to hear it spoken aloud.

“— would you be interested in doing that again, but more?” Lan Zhan’s eyes closed tight, squeezing Wei Wuxian’s hands like a lifeline.

This was, Wei Wuxian realized, as relaxed as Lan Zhan knew how to be. Enough to express himself, but winding tighter with every word, every passing moment. Wei Wuxian could give him what he needed, and it would be everything he craved.

“Do you know what you’re asking?”

“I — I borrowed your book.” Lan Zhan flushed on his chest, too, Wei Wuxian discovered, not just his ears. “It was enlightening.”

“The one you thought was a crime against morality.” Wei Wuxian could have sworn Lan Zhan was one wrong word away from burning the entire section of the library to ash when he impulsively showed him that book.

“I would like to commit crimes against morality with you,” Lan Zhan said, like it was nothing, like he had not just been stumbling over euphemisms for sex, like all his rules no longer mattered.

Wei Wuxian choked.

“Nothing would make me happier.” Almost true. Lan Zhan returning his feelings, willingly marrying him again before his grandmothers with A-Ma healthy was the best thing he could imagine. It was also, as Lan Zhan had only just confirmed, a pipe dream. “But —”

“You don’t need to protect me, Wei Ying —”

“You didn’t let me finish!” For such a taciturn man, Lan Zhan was prone to interrupting at the most easily misinterpreted times, as if *he* was the one whose heart was simultaneously tearing apart and piecing itself back together. “I was going to say there are things you should know before we do anything more. This is new to you, and I’ve only read about it.”

“That sounds reasonable.” He did not sound happy about it. But Lan Zhan knew the value of information, and he would understand the importance when he had it.

He rolled them over, so Lan Zhan was half under him.

“I thought —” Lan Zhan started, only for Wei Wuxian to silence him with his lips.

“Kissing’s allowed,” he murmured against them.

The hum of Lan Zhan’s agreement reverberated through him, as he did not bother to pull away to answer.

Lan Zhan wasn’t in love with him, but he wanted him. It was as much as he would ever offer, and Wei Wuxian was greedy. He would drink every last drop until the well ran dry, leaving him parched and alone in a desert of his own making.

Someone pounded on the door with a force that could only belong to Chifeng-zun. It continued, incessantly as Wei Wuxian scrambled out of bed. He threw on a fresh inner robe, belting it, but letting it hang open, leaving no doubt what they’d been up to. To give Lan Zhan time to get presentable, Wei Wuxian opened the door only a crack.

Nie Mingjue looked surprised to see him. As did all of the other sect leaders behind him.

“Is interrupting newlyweds on the morning after a tradition everyone forgot to tell me about?” Wei Wuxian drawled.

Nie Mingjue remained stern — murderous, even.

But it was Zewu-jun who announced, “The Yin Iron has been stolen.”

## Chapter End Notes

Writing this chapter was like, I've already written arranged marriage wedding night kink-discovery, how do I do it *different*?

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 12

## Chapter Summary

The Yin Iron has been stolen, but more importantly, Lan Wangji reads erotica

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** lwj reads some sex diaries in this one, and pretty much everything from "Lan Wangji has doubts" to the end of the chapter is explicit. There are three short sections that I have indented and italicized if you want to skip them for kink content/because they're in first person with varied pronouns. In order: 1. sub pov impact play, 2. dom pov CNC with an explicit check-in, 3. switch character describing their hookup habits. The *actual* wangxian smut just features praise kink and a little ordering around

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

“The Yin Iron has been stolen,” Nie Mingjue said.

The words took a long moment to sink in.

A-Ma. He felt the ghost of A-Ma’s hands guiding him through holding a rabbit for the first time, saw A-Ma falling to the ground on the day everything changed.

One of these people wanted to steal his chance to save her, had already tried to steal it. They could not have her. They could not have it.

They knew nothing of Lan Yi, only a story of a hero and a cautionary tale, a woman long dead.

One of them knew where the Yin Iron was. The sect leaders and their seconds stood arrayed before his door, packed so closely together he could not see them all. But there was Jin Guangshan, smirking, right at the front, and Lan Xichen, furious, behind Nie Mingjue’s shoulder.

“*Stolen?*” Wei Wuxian reached for resentment instinctively, shadows gathering to force the truth out of his enemies — and Lan Zhan slipped Wei Wuxian’s usual black outer robe over his shoulders.

Wei Wuxian kissed him on the cheek, glancing at him over his shoulder. Lan Zhan looked as poised as ever, but his hair remained scandalously loose, the mark Wei Wuxian had left

prominent on his neck. Calming, just by his presence. If Lan Zhan had been with him, Wei Wuxian could have cleansed the Burial Mounds ten times faster.

Lucky for Jin Guangshan that Lan Zhan was there to keep him from doing anything *drastic*. If Lan Zhan had wrapped his arms around Wei Wuxian's waist instead of hovering there, Wei Wuxian might even have managed pleasantries.

"Perhaps you can explain elsewhere," Wei Wuxian suggested.

Jin Guangshan was excellent at ignoring suggestions. "Someone slipped into the room without leaving a trace behind save the bodies of the guards. You must have stolen it, afraid our word was only as good as yours."

"I fulfilled my promise, you may recall. It was my wedding night. I was here." Wei Wuxian didn't understand how anyone might think otherwise. Even now, with a pit twisting in his stomach, he felt so like a cat with cream that everyone must have seen it.

Nie Mingjue narrowed his eyes at him. "You were here all night?"

"All night." Lan Zhan confirmed.

"All night, really? Hanguang-jun didn't sleep at all?" Jin Guangshan sounded almost impressed. Wei Ying would prefer he did not impress Jin Guangshan at all.

"All night," Lan Zhan repeated, his implying it was ridiculous of Jin Guangshan to ask. Though he could not know for certain. They *had* both slept, Lan Zhan so heavily Wei Wuxian would have had to dump a bucket of water on his head to wake him.

Lan Zhan did not love him, but he had more faith in him than he had earned.

Lan Xichen had a coughing fit at his brother's admission, no doubt trying to wipe the confirmation that the Yiling Laozu had defiled his brother from his mind, particularly with the stamina Lan Zhan implied. He never should have agreed to Lan Xichen's modifications to the deal in exchange for him reluctantly stepping out of their path to the altar.

Well, Wei Wuxian had very much defiled his brother and intended to do so again — missing Yin Iron and the gaps in Lan Zhan's knowledge notwithstanding — but he had not done so all night. Yet.

"If you didn't steal it, who did?" Nie Mingjue asked, and at least he was not *entirely* accusing.

"Perhaps that's a question you should ask of yourselves," Wei Wuxian gestured at the crowd. Any of the sect leaders would have benefited more from pinning the blame on him than he would from stealing items he had already been promised.

They did not, of course. It was too easy to assume Wei Wuxian had been lying about his intent to destroy the Yin Iron to deflect the blame when he stole it for personal use. But they had no proof, because Wei Wuxian had not, actually, stolen it.

Which brought them to the present.

Building a palace fit for the Yiling Laozu.

Their departure from Qishan was hasty. With few things to pack, all they had to do was gather Wen Qing and some three score refugees Lan Zhan had adopted somehow — because he was ~~the perfect man~~ just as prone to picking up strays as Wei Wuxian — and Wei Wuxian transported them all to the Burial Mounds.

There was only a minor amount of screaming from the refugees as the darkness enveloped them, and a few demonstrated the Wen tendency for seasickness when they reached their destination.

Lan Zhan made sure to point out the tailor couple who had provided their wedding robes. When the Yiling Laozu personally thanked and assured them they would be able to set up a new shop, here in town, they nodded, dazed. And nodded again when the Yiling Laozu requested they wait in the Burial Mounds, for just a moment, while he carried out his filial duty.

Waipo was in the cave when they arrived. She did not turn when he entered, leaving Lan Zhan at the entrance. This news, he needed to deliver in private. Despite her eternal youth, Waipo looked small and ancient, hunched over and staring dull-eyed into the shifting light of the array.

She knew the news was not good before he spoke. The boy she raised would never keep her in suspense unless he was trying to find words that would break her heart. Though in truth, he knew all along that he must remove the dagger from the wound before he could attempt to seal it.

“Waipo, your A-Xian failed. The Yin Iron was stolen.”

“Oh,” she said, flat, emotionless. Empty, as his Waipo should never be.

“We have strong suspicions by whom,” Who else could it be, really? Unless there was a secret mastermind hiding behind Jin Guangshan’s blatant villainy, but the only cultivators he’d met who were clever enough had no motive. “We need to prove it, though, or war will be declared on Yiling when I try to take it back. I don’t want to kill people who are only misguided by their leader, Waipo. One war was more than — one war was too much.”

“Any war is too much,” Waipo sounded less like she’d burst and scatter like ash if he touched her. So he hugged her, clinging as he rarely had as a child, because she needed it as much as he did.

Waipo stroked his hair, voice thick with unshed tears. “Oh, A-Xian, you didn’t fail us.”

Not yet he hadn’t. Not when he’d come this far. Not when A-Ma lay there, unmoving in golden light, like she was encased in amber.

“Wei Ying, the refugees are getting anxious,” Lan Zhan called.

“Wei Ying, ah?” A hint of Waipo’s usual teasing returned.

“I couldn’t have my husband call me by my courtesy name.” He summoned a bit of indignation in return, only to realize when her expression shuttered that he hadn’t yet told her about his wedding. “Waipo, I’m sorry. Our new enemy insisted we get married at the banquet celebrating the end of the war — and the Yin Iron was stolen that night.”

“I see. We’ll have to hold a second ceremony, then.” Waipo looked at her wife and did not look away. “Eventually. But what’s this about refugees? My A-Xian hadn’t picked up enough foundlings?”

“They’re Lan Zhan’s, actually, though I did say we’d take any who wanted to come. I don’t trust any of the sect leaders — the *other* Sect Leaders, I suppose, fuck — not to treat them like they personally razed their homes and murdered their children. They’re just civilians, Waipo.” And Lan Zhan had stopped Jin Guangshan’s nephew from hunting them down like street dogs after prey.

Waipo patted his knee. “You did well, you and your A-Zhan. That boy’s perfect for you.”

“I know,” he said, his distress leaking through.

“Oh, A-Xian. Your A-Ma thought I would never forgive her, and look at us, five hundred years married,” Waipo attempted to reassure him. But all he could think was that it wasn’t five hundred years. Not yet.

Five hundred years *next* year. If — when — they made it.

“Wei Ying, I am being asked questions I do not know the answer to,” Lan Zhan called again, distressed. He had somehow acquired a small child from one of the refugees, perhaps five years of age, who was pushing their forefinger into the squishable flesh of Lan Zhan’s cheek. Wei Wuxian rose to his feet without conscious thought to hurry to his side.

Looking over his shoulder as he returned to the sun, Wei Wuxian grimaced as his grandmother edged closer to the array, as close to her wife’s side as she could manage. Lan Zhan arched his brow slightly, questioning.

“She’ll carry on. She always does,” he told Lan Zhan. “Waipo can’t leave the mountain for too long, her presence is necessary to maintain it, but she’ll do what she can, when she can.”

“We’ll find it, Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan assured him, as he hiked the child higher in his arms, making them giggle.

Moreover, Wei Wuxian could not imagine the culprit had taken it without the intent to use it, and when they did, the array would flare, straining against the power reaching for his A-Ma. The array would turn it away, keeping her safe and unaware — but for how long?

Jin Guangshan was the most likely culprit, but accusing him formally would be no small matter. Evidence would be required, where it was not to accuse the Yiling Laozu. Undeniable

evidence that he could not turn around on Wei Wuxian.

The best thing they could do now was build Wei Wuxian's reputation in a different direction, show that the Yiling Laozu was no longer a figure to be feared. The palace they were building, the call for adult disciples, all of it was for show. All to prove the Yiling Laozu was a tamed beast now that he was married to the virtuous Second Jade of Lan.

The people of Yiling were delighted by the prospect of building their Laozu a suitable residence. Delighted that he intended to build a sect where their children would be welcome to train if they showed potential. Trade, too, would increase with the establishment of a sect, as merchants would stop shying away from Yiling's recently renewed resources.

Often, the clearing at the center of the Burial mounds was filled with chatter, as the foundations were laid for the central complex of buildings. Wen Ning was the chief architect, having discovered a talent for design when he built houses for his relatives on Baoshan Sanren's mountain. He was always in the thick of things, carrying and sawing planks, stepping in whenever anyone needed a hand, and generally making his sister fret.

The town of Yiling bustled with activity as the refugees settled in. They claimed empty houses in the town and surrounding fields. There were plenty lying empty in various states of disrepair since their previous inhabitants met tragic ends. It was a foundation from which they could rebuild their lives, and the population of Yiling welcomed their arrival. Fields that had been fallow for years could now be farmed, diversifying the town's crops and increasing their meat supply. And if a handful of merchants and artisans in town did not appreciate the competition from fresh blood, their customers appreciated the variety, and there were enough newcomers to keep both old and new in business.

All of this progressed with only minor hitches, many of them handled by Lan Zhan before they even reached his ears, as Lan Zhan had been trained to lead in a way he had not.

Still, Wei Wuxian could not shake the feeling that he was simply not capable of the role he had taken on.

He threw himself into what he could manage — solving disputes, building devices to make building easier, ensuring Waipo went back to the mountain to rest and eat, choosing a selection of bedroom game books for Lan Zhan.

There, Wei Wuxian's mind got ahead of him, fabricating scenes he could not yet know if Lan Zhan would enjoy every time he saw a drop of sweat trace its way down his neck, every time he was treated to the privilege of Lan Zhan letting his hair down after his nightly ablutions. Kissing was, ironically easier though it was a sliver of what he craved. Kissing, he could focus on learning the ways Lan Zhan reacted to each graze of teeth or tongue, on setting him a little more off-balance with each brush of his lips.

Lan Zhan was a dangerous indulgence. When they were together, it was easy to forget the rest of the world existed and was intent on causing them problems.

Lan Wangji had doubts of Wei Ying's ability to present himself as tame. He was simply too much himself, clever and wild and free, for such an attempt to be believable.

No one need know that if anyone was being tamed, it was Hanguang-jun himself.

Or at least, that it was Hanguang-jun who *wished* he was being tamed. Who caught himself at inconvenient times, pushing his fingers against the roof of his mouth, trying to replicate the feeling of Wei Ying's in his mouth, and had to busy his hands to prevent anyone seeing.

He was fast becoming an expert at sanding wood until it was smooth — a better task for his strength than hammering wood together, Lan Wangji had quickly realized, after the second time he split a board by mistake at the sight of Wei Ying stretching. His arms overhead, muscles flexing, the sun catching on droplets of sweat. For Wei Ying peeled off the upper half of his robes every day by afternoon, letting them dangle around his waist as he worked.

The second time he also broke the wooden mallet.

Though they had far more important problems to worry about than his libido, Lan Wangji was *suffering*.

They spent their nights back on the mountain, in a replica of those months before they went to war. Save that they slept in the same bed, and when they did not both fall asleep the moment their heads hit the pillow, kissed languidly until they drifted off.

Lan Wangji felt like he was going to jump out of his skin if Wei Ying did not touch him soon. It had been *weeks*. Every time Wei Ying looked at him, he burned, set alight by the flames in his husband's eyes.

If Wei Ying had not explained why it was important that Lan Wangji be better prepared before he could have what he had implicitly asked for, he would have strongly considered taking off his own robes, audience or no audience.

But Wei Ying had given him The Books.

"I picked out these for you, I think they should be helpful," Wei Ying set a stack of thin volumes down on the desk. "I need to know what you want to try, and what you don't, before I make you — before I touch you." He slipped briefly into the voice Lan Wangji longed to hear before correcting himself.

At first Lan Wangji was confused why he needed to read anything to have sex, when Wei Ying hadn't insisted on it before. But as he paged through the spring books, it became clear. There were so many basic differences between bedroom games and ordinary sex that would never have occurred to him.

There were more stories, like the one he had borrowed, but also manuals compiled by anonymous disciples, describing how to submit with appropriate precautions through their own experiences. How he could be good for Wei Ying, and how to — he couldn't so much as think about the idea without his entire body heating — be naughty, so Wei Ying would punish him.



Lan Wangji had never thought of pain as something to be desired before; punishment was for transgressions against the rules. Rules he was now in the habit of breaking, though he had tried for so long to stick to the path laid out for him. He had not been punished since he stopped kneeling at his mother's door. His punishments then had not been for the kneeling, not directly, but because he refused to answer his teacher's questions and once, for a screaming outburst.

But the idea of Wei Ying punishing him was —

When Wei Ying's cock hit the back of his throat, cutting off his breath for a moment before he drew back, Lan Wangji had nearly come on the spot. The feeling he'd had then, like he was on the brink of release beyond a simple orgasm, of finding a place where his worries could not follow, where even the tension he carried with him day by day vanished into nothing.

He needed to feel that again.

Lan Wangji devoured the texts, one after another, noting down practical details, only to stain his paper with ink whenever he found a story that appealed.

*My lover loves when I disobey her, and I love the results. I touch my lover after she tell me to keep my hands over my head, and she stops fucking me. I 'm flipped on my belly, and she tells me how naughty I've been, how I deserve whatever I'm given. I tell her no, no, please, knowing she'll ignore me, and when she brings out the flogger, I mewl just the way she likes, missing a count on the first try so she has to start again. When she's through, it's easy for her to finish me off, but she's not done then, she doesn't stop until I've come three more times, and her robes are stained with my juices.*

One evening while washing off the sweat of the day, Lan Wangji pinched his own ass. And then slapped it.

He mostly just felt silly. But the idea of Wei Ying making his thighs sting, making his ass match the blush of his ears sent a violent shiver through him, his cock stirring.

Lan Wangji quickly thought of other things. He wanted his next orgasm to come at Wei Ying's hands. It felt safer, somehow, to let go with Wei Ying than by himself. But he had more to read.

*I wake him in the middle of the night. He 's blindfolded, a sheer cloth through which the glow of a candle is only just visible, his arms bound above his head. He asks for me, and I press a finger against his lips, our signal that it's all right for him to let go. Only then does he begin to squirm and plead. I fasten on nipple clamps with a chain and tug on them as I ride him, and it isn't long before he forgets what sort of game we're playing. I stop, and whisper threats, until he remembers how to plead.*

*When we pretend we 're strangers, our old relationship feels new again.*

Lan Wangji would not want to pretend anyone other than Wei Ying was in bed with him, but he wondered if the Yiling Laozu might pay the unsuspecting Second Jade of Lan a visit in the “Jingshi”.

Stories had lied to him. Bedroom games could be dangerous, even if properly negotiated. It was not all an instinctual meeting of bodies, but a dialog of question and response. It had not been reasonable to expect Wei Ying to predict all his desires with no outside input, he would need some guidance — and perhaps Wei Ying would not want to do certain things to him. It made him hesitant to ask for games the manuals listed as more intense, however much interest his cock showed.

At least bondage was unlikely to be on that list. Wei Ying liked twining things through his fingers too much for that — his cords for decorative knots, yarn for weaving, Lan Wangji’s hair, anything he could fiddle with. And the spring book that ended in bondage sex *was* one of his favorites.

Wei Ying had not insisted on a definite list, but on an initial lists of kinks that sparked his interest. He could ask for more later, if he worked up the courage.

Lan Wangji procured some of Wei Ying’s smallest, simplest knotted tassels to mark the place of games he found particularly interesting. Hoping that he could minimize what he had to admit out loud.

Though, he had to admit, the idea of Wei Ying teasing him until he admitted his most deeply buried desires was... not unappealing. If only he would do so *now*, now that Lan Wangji had some idea what he wanted, rather than later.

Perhaps halfway through the texts, Lan Wangji chanced upon a compromise in the otherwise least appealing narrative he had come across.

*It is not difficult, when I night hunt in the villages, to find a willing partner for an evening. We ask each other only the necessary questions — preserving the mystery is the greater part of the allure. I 'm fucked on a riverbank or spend hours teaching a temporary servant to kneel, and then we part, never knowing each other's names.*

*Others in these texts tell of their great loves; I have never felt a need for such a person. My martial siblings are my closest companions, and I have always preferred it that way.*

Sleeping with strangers — anyone but Wei Ying, really — was viscerally unappealing. But the anonymous disciples’ text *did* give him an idea, if he had the courage to carry it out.

Lan Wangji snapped the next day.

It was the middle of a very hot afternoon, and Lan Wangji's bottom two layers were soaked through with sweat. Lan Wangji felt he could not entirely be blamed for his actions. Dehydration and sunstroke were clearly the culprits.

He was hard at work, sanding the next set of boards to be moved into place. But by then the task was automatic, and he had plenty of time to watch his husband. He never tired of watching his husband, especially when he was being clever. Which was always.

Today, Wei Ying was building a pulley to help lift the beams for the roof of the first structure into place.

Wei Ying's chest glistened.

An adolescent boy had come to help with his father that day, and Wei Ying had him hold onto the rope, demonstrating how it worked by lifting him up to the height of the crossbeams, and lowering him safely down, squealing with delight all the while.

Lan Wangji wanted to marry him all over again.

And drag him off into the surrounding woods immediately. It wasn't the muscles that attracted him so, though the way Wei Ying's biceps bulged when he pulled on the rope *was* appealing, but the cleverness of his hands, as he had noted the day they met.

The pulley made quick work of things, enabling the roof to near completion that much faster. Rooms for the first handful of disciples must come first, and the kitchens, and a classroom — and only then would the chambers he was to share with Wei Ying be completed. Space for more disciples and guest chambers could follow only when a functioning sect had been established.

Now, the first completed room could be finished with resin, and filled with furniture commissioned from Yiling's fierce corpse carpenter, nearly ready for an as yet undetermined person to move in. It felt like progress.

To celebrate, skewers of roasted pork and platters of sliced watermelon were brought up from the village, and the workers descended on it like beasts.

As Lan Wangji watched the meat-and-fruit-based carnage, Wei Ying sidled over to him. "You should eat something — you've been out in the sun all day, too."

Lan Wangji shook his head — he wasn't hungry, at least not in the literal sense. "May we speak in private?"

"Of course." Wei Ying gestured for Lan Wangji to proceed him into the forest. There were fewer dead tree trunks among the undergrowth now, those that could be salvaged appropriated for their wood. In the depths of summer, the forest was a thriving sea of green, birds chirped and rustled leaves as they flew from branch to branch, and a chipmunk sprinted across their path. If not for the fossilized stumps and discolored wood of many of the trees, it could have been the forest outside the Cloud Recesses, not the single most feared place in the Cultivation World.

They walked a ways from the construction site in companionable silence, finding their way to a waist-deep stream that ran down from the Burial Mounds to a river below. Lan Wangji was not yet certain if it was a good thing that Wei Ying felt he could be silent with him, or if he simply thought him boring.

“Hold on, I’m going to drain that stream dry.” Wei Ying knelt at the edge of the water and stuck his face in it, rising a moment later as he gulped down a mouthful, droplets dripping from his chin to land on his chest and drip down further. “What did you want to talk about?”

Lan Wangji’s eyes followed the trail of droplets to where they dampened his robes at the waist, barely even registering that he had been asked a question.

“Let’s take a dip in the stream, yeah? And we can talk when we’re not boiling,” Wei Ying suggested, misinterpreting stripping to bathe as an activity that would help him remember how to speak, somehow.

Lan Wangji was not one to pass up the opportunity to see his husband naked. There were so many details he could never learn them all, no matter how many hours he spent staring

Wei Ying untied his belt to let the robes hanging from his waist fall to the ground and removed his pants, and Lan Wangji was treated to the sight of his husband’s ass. If he bit Wei Ying in the ass, would he turn Lan Wangji’s ass red with the palm of his hand, or use a flogger on his thighs until Lan Wangji could not sit down without remembering for a week?

As Wei Ying waded into the water, Lan Wangji peeled off his own robes and stumbled over a rock in his hurry to follow him. The shock of cold water dulled his lust, at least, if only slightly. There was a lot of his husband on display.

“So what did you want to talk to me about?” Wei Ying turned around and froze, his eyes roving over Lan Wangji like *he* was the watermelon the workers were devouring. “I did not think this through.”

At least it wasn’t only him. Wei Ying stepped forward, reaching out to touch – and stopped

Lan Wangji leaned in and kissed him — that much was acceptable, Wei Ying always liked to be kissed, and a kiss was always an event in itself. He felt savored, like a decadent dessert of which Wei Ying never grew tired.

Now was no different, his arms twined around Lan Wangji’s shoulders, but when Lan Wangji’s errant hands found their way to his ass and Wei Ying’s cock brushed his hip, he pulled back. Wei Ying climbed entirely out of the water to stand, dripping and barefoot, on the shore. “Have you finished your reading already?”

Lan Wangji shook his head.

“It was a big pile of books, and Hanguang-jun has been so busy.” Wei Ying teased, and Lan Wangji did *not* roll his eyes.

“This is what I wished to speak of with you. I did read that people sometimes...” Sex was so difficult to speak of. Surely Wei Ying could invent a talisman that would let them communicate fantasies with images, mind to mind. “... negotiate spontaneous play. With strangers.”

Wei Ying gaped at him. “... is that something you’re interested in, Lan Zhan? I don’t think I —”

“No! I mean.” That was the opposite of what he wished to convey. Sharing might be alright with some people, but Lan Wangji was far too jealous a creature. He was also entirely uninterested in anyone but Wei Ying touching him intimately. It was gratifying to learn that Wei Ying shared the sentiment, at least to some extent. “I have not finished reading, but I thought, perhaps.”

“Speak up. Or do you need me to make you?” Wei Ying’s voice lowered, carrying the promise of orders to be obeyed.

Suddenly conscious of how far above him Wei Ying was on the rocky bank, Lan Wangji sucked in a breath that failed to fill his lungs. Wei Ying’s eyes darkened as he looked him up and down, and held out a hand. Lan Wangji took it.

“Noted.” Wei Ying pulled him up onto the shore, holding him close, their hips flush against each other, his mouth a whisper away. It would be so easy to just kiss him again. “For later. You want to agree on specific ways for me to fuck you now because I’ve been running around practically naked all day, don’t you?”

“Yes. If you are interested.” He added the qualification despite the way Wei Ying’s cock twitched against him.

“You’re not the only one who wants this. Do you have any idea how distracting you are?” Wei Ying breathed.

Lan Wangji did not, but he would love for Wei Ying to tell him. He believed that was called a ‘praise kink’ — or perhaps just dirty talk, depending on the content. But hearing the ways he attracted Wei Ying’s attention would always feel like praise. “*You* are the distracting one.”

Wei Ying laughed, bright and warm. “You win, clearly I’m being too cautious. Today, no means no, and we’ll start light. You’re my first too, and I’d like some more... practical experience, I suppose you would say. I want to make you sing before I make you scream,” he tilted his head. “...I would say if I was the hero of a bad romance novel.”

It did not sound like a bad line to Lan Wangji, only like Wei Ying might really fuck him. “Acceptable.”

Wei Ying kissed the corner of his mouth, at odds with the deep tenor of his voice. “What do you need, Hanguang-jun? Do you need suggestions? I could watch you, tell you how to stroke yourself, but you’ve been denying yourself for too long, you won’t last, and then where would I be? Or I could fuck you right here in the open —”

“Yes,” Lan Wangji said as soon as the words ‘fuck you’ registered. Which was before the words ‘in the open,’ but there was a convenient fossilized tree nearby, wide enough to kneel over and worn smooth with the passing of time.

Wei Ying followed his line of sight, and Lan Wangji loved that he could feel his reaction, lessening his fear that Wei Ying could feel his own.

“Oh. Okay. Yes, I would love to fuck you. Can I use my mouth while I work you open, I really want — Fuck. My lube is in my house back on the mountain, maybe we should just go there.”

Lan Wangji’s entire body flushed as he drew reluctantly out of Wei Ying’s arms to fish a qiankun bag from the sleeve of his discarded robe, and from the bag retrieved a jar of lubricant.

Wei Ying took it from him, unsealed the jar, and dipped two fingers inside. The gelatinous material coated his fingers, slowly oozing back into the jar. “Now where did Hanguang-jun get *this*?”

“Several aunties in Yiling insisted on a wedding present.” An embarrassing number of similar items had been provided, though he only kept the one on himself.

Wei Ying’s eyes widened. “Don’t tell me which ones. I’ll never be able to look them in the eye again.”

“You may use your mouth on me.” Lan Wangji said. The texts had assured him that rimming was immensely pleasurable, though it did not seem the most sanitary of acts.

“Okay, okay, I’m going to fuck you then, here and now,” Wei Ying said with an air of disbelief. He lay his robes down before the fallen tree, guiding Lan Wangji to kneel. He pressed his face into the fossilized wood still cool in the shade, his ass in the air as he waited for Wei Ying to act.

He palmed his ass first, squeezing gently, leaving sticky lubricant in the wake of his fingers. “Hanguang-jun is so good for me, I won’t keep you waiting,” Wei Ying said, and a finger breached him where he had been untouched, beginning to pump it in and out.

“Ah,” he breathed, so turned on he couldn’t help it, though Wei Ying had barely *done* anything yet. Maybe he *should* have given into the temptation to touch himself.

“So eager for me already.” Wei Ying pressed a kiss to the base of his spine. “Has Hanguang-jun been reading porn without getting himself off? Have you been waiting for me?”

He added a second finger, curling them as he drove in deeper, stroking over a sensitive spot, before retreating. Lan Wangji’s cock twitched dangerously. Teetering on edge, his hips trust back without his direction, chasing the fleeting sensation Wei Ying denied him. “Ah-ah, Hanguang-jun. No coming until I’m inside you. You can wait that long.”

Wei Ying laved at his rim, the wetness of his tongue startling as Lan Wangji had already forgotten his intentions. He worked around his fingers with his tongue, until he slipped it in alongside them. Lan Wangji barely noticed when he added a third finger, too focused on holding back orgasm, despite Wei Ying's deliberate avoidance of his prostate.

Finally, his fingers retreated and the blunt end of his cock, slick with lubricant, nudged against Lan Wangji's rim.

He whined, the pitch increasing as Wei Ying pushed inside, only to cut off in a sob when Wei Ying stopped halfway. There was a slight stretch, but Wei Ying had spent so much time working him open, ass in the air where any of the workers taking a stroll could come across them, it was barely noticeable.

"You can take me, Lan Zhan, you know you can. You're dripping all over my robes. You need me to fuck you," Wei Ying panted from the effort of holding back. "But I want you to beg — ask. Ask me for it. Tell me you want me."

This far gone, it was easy to beg, the words rushing out without conscious thought. "Yes, yes, please, Wei Ying, I want you, Wei *Ying*."

Leaning over his back, Wei Ying whispered, "Good enough for today."

He pulled back and thrust all the way inside. "Fuck," he mumbled, almost drowned out by Lan Wangji's cry, "fuck, you feel — so hot and perfect, fuck. Be patient a moment longer, or I'll have to get you off some other way. You feel too good."

Lan Wangji bit his lip to keep back his whimpers, but one escaped anyway.

"That's my good boy," Wei Ying added, his thumbs stroking over the dimple of his back. "Be loud for me. Let out everything you try so hard to keep in."

Once he found the right angle, Lan Wangji's hips pushing back against him, it was too much, so much more than he had felt before. Pleasure blotted out all thought, he stopped trying to hold back, and he came, drawn out as Wei Ying chased his own completion.

Wei Ying pulled out at the last second, cum splattering the log, and his thighs, pooling with Lan Wangji's own on the robe beneath their knees.

Wei Ying pulled him back against his chest, and he stared down at the mess they had made. "Next time, if you want, I can fill you with my cum in the morning, leave you with it dripping between your thighs while you work."

Wei Ying pressed gentle kisses to his neck and shoulder, letting him melt back into him. "But for now, how does heading back to the mountain and eating in our room sound? It'll be cooler there, and we can cuddle in bed while we eat."

Lan Wangji craned his neck to kiss him. His husband was not in love with him, but he was perfect.

## Chapter End Notes

The theft of the Yin Iron cannot stop Wangxian from being horny 😏

[Promo Tweet](#)



# Chapter 13

## Chapter Summary

Wei Wuxian reluctantly adjusts to being a sect leader, Wangxian get started on kink exploration

## Chapter Notes

Thank you for all of the comments! I promise to reply by the end of June after my schedule lightens up!

**CW:** smut goes from "Wei Wuxian decided to start" to the end of the chapter, features light bondage and temperature play with warm massage oil (so the safer kind!)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first prospective disciple came up the mountain from Yiling the same day Wei Wuxian announced the call for students. Though a few dorms were furnished, the Burial Mounds was not yet prepared to deal with students. The kitchens had only just been completed, a cook and three servants hired from among the refugees. His own quarters weren't ready either. Lan Zhan, Wen Ning, and Wen Qing were all conspiring to make them "fit for a sect leader," whatever that meant. The construction of the palace complex would continue for some time yet, even building into the mounds themselves through the second cave.

Wei Wuxian had expected a few weeks travel time, at least, before anyone showed up on his doorstep. Enough time to start getting used to taking an active roll in managing a territory with a rapidly growing population. The people of Yiling could still, generally, be trusted to manage themselves, but he'd hoped for a grace period where he could get a better handle on the ins and outs of running a sect.

But it seemed the jeweler's daughter, An Yulun, had been studying cultivation from a basic manual for years, and this was her chance to realize her dreams. Wei Wuxian *did* have to extract a promise that she would stop flirting now he was her Shifu, to which she readily agreed.

An Yulun had already formed a Golden Core, so he couldn't simply throw her into meditation exercises and hope a qualified teacher showed up soon. Wei Wuxian had to come up with a

curriculum himself, amidst the other demands on his time, since the disciples of Yiling Wei couldn't run around using Lan techniques.

Once he'd accepted one disciple, a floodgate opened. Apparently, the news that the Yiling Laozu was founding a sect had spread far and wide as the sects traveled back from Qishan. Prospective students had begun traveling toward Yiling to beg admittance weeks earlier.

There were three types who wished to learn from the Yiling Laozu: rogue cultivators who wanted to settle down, survivors of decimated sects, and wannabee demonic cultivators, thinly disguising their lust for his secrets.

Those last, he turned away. If Wei Wuxian ever did pass down his knowledge, it would not be to one who came searching for it. But soon enough he had a dozen disciples on the brink of adulthood, no teachers, and no clue how he wanted to shape the sect's martial style.

Wei Wuxian found he enjoyed few of a sect leader's responsibilities, and those, like training disciples, were the first to be pushed aside or more urgent tasks. Already, an endless sea of letters piled up on his desk, arriving so quickly that other sect leaders must not have bothered to unpack before setting ink to paper. Each needed his personal attention. Everyone wanted something from the Yiling Laozu.

Despite his joking that he would make Wen Qing do all the work, Wei Wuxian would never actually ask her to.

Besides, Wen Qing was busy with the trickle of refugees making their way in from Qishan, many of them much the worse for wear, to do much beyond updating her accounts of Yiling's resources and vetting his letters. It made for a good excuse for avoiding her own problems.

"Have you heard from Mianmian yet?" Wei Wuxian asked, while she was eating between patients.

Wen Qing, who had just stuck a piece of fatty pork in her mouth, took her time chewing before answering, flatly, "Why would I have heard from Mianmian."

Wei Wuxian had known her for far too long to believe she didn't know *exactly* why Mianmian hadn't written. "What did you say to her?"

"I promised I would explain why we can't — you know, after the war, and then I left without saying goodbye." Wen Qing said with characteristic bluntness.

And okay, the not saying goodbye wasn't exactly her fault, considering how quickly they'd had to leave. But if Wen Qing had time to nitpick his character choices in a hundred letters, she certainly had time to write one of her own.

"Wen *Qing*." He whined. "This isn't *just* about your romantic prospects, she could find information on what Jin Guangshan has done with the Yin Iron."

Jin Zixuan had a vested interest in not becoming sect leader for another few decades — not to mention that the least urgent but most entertaining letter he had received reported his

whereabouts as Lotus Pier. Jiang Cheng complained at length about how he wouldn't leave, and how Jiang Yanli found it charming that the 'Peacock' kept giving himself minor injuries whenever she walked by.

Mianmian, on the other hand, wanted Jin Guangshan gone as much as anyone. If not more. She had about as much respect for the ways of the Cultivation World as Wei Wuxian did — which was to say none at all.

It was definitely also about Wen Qing's romantic prospects though.

"*You* send a letter," she snapped.

"Maybe I will. And then you'll have to talk to her." Win-win solution in his book.

"You're a terrible friend," she grumbled.

"You knew that when you decided to keep me," he clasped his hands behind his back and blinked at her, the picture of innocence.

Rolling her eyes, Wen Qing changed the subject. "I'll have the estimates of what we can afford to trade, and what resources you should prioritize by tomorrow. If we can get an agreement on dyes for silk with Yunmeng, that's imperative. We need formal robes for the sect, and an entire matching collection for you and your husband. And for me, if you still want a Wen for your First Disciple."

Wen Qing intended to teach her branch clan's medical cultivation under the auspices of Yiling Wei. And while she was likely to live a very long time without outside interference, hers were skills they could not risk losing.

"We'll find you your first apprentice as soon as we're able to start night hunts. There's a little girl among the refugees who's a promising candidate, but." He shrugged.

No children and no new Wens in the sect, until the Yin Iron was dealt with.

"I'll send her basic texts on plant-identification and meditation, if she's interested, but there's time. Now get out so I can eat before anyone else needs me."

"Yes, ma'am." He paused in the door. "Don't think I've forgotten about Mianmian, though!"

Wen Qing stuck her tongue out at him. His ability to bring the inner child out of people was his most valuable skill, Wei Wuxian was convinced.

Though maybe it shouldn't be *him* who wrote the letter. Wei Wuxian should ask Lan Zhan to invite Mianmian to Yiling, if Wen Qing wasn't going to do it. She'd be happiest to hear from him, now.

Lan Zhan wrote the letter, so that was one thing settled. One thing in a mess rapidly spiraling out of control.

The disciples lacked focus, and didn't like his methods, and the stream of letters only sped up as they began to send out feelers for trade agreements.

Not to mention, there were still puppets running loose across the countryside, now uncontrolled, but Wei Wuxian couldn't afford to step on the toes of Jin Guangshan's lackeys by hunting them down or helping more people flee.

Stepping on their territory would be seen as an invasion, an act of war.

He couldn't even write to said lackeys and question why they weren't doing their jobs.

Again, act of war.

He could only make sure that the handful of puppets that stepped onto his lands did not survive the experience.

The restraint wore him down quickly. And while sex with Lan Zhan was always wonderful, there was restraint there as well, both of them needing something just out of reach.

But there was one avenue still open to him — complaining to his grandmother. It always put a smile on her face when he was dramatic, and Waipo needed a distraction as much as he did right now.

He chose a time when she was back on the mountain, her presence maintaining the bubble that kept the region off the maps and under her protection. He sprawled on the floor of his grandmother's home, scattering the day's letters on the floor around him. Waipo kept staring down at weaving she could do in her sleep.

Wei Wuxian sighed heavily to get her attention.

She raised a brow at him, her hands continuing her work. "Since when do you need permission to speak, A-Xian?"

He huffed loudly. "Waipo, how did you manage it?"

"I did not start a sect on a whim." She said and he gasped, grasping his chest as though wounded. "Nor did I start one all at once, but took in a handful of disciples at a time. I can't see how I'd be much help."

How silly of her. She was Baoshan Sanren and his grandmother. She was always helpful, even if help was simply lending an ear.

"Waipooo, it wasn't even my idea!"

"I know, A-Xian," she said, not taking him seriously for a moment. "I talked it over with my wife, and we prepared to bring disciples to the mountain long before we took the first children in. It was a very different situation. However, I can advise you on a starting curriculum, and you have A-Qing and *your* husband to assist you."

Wen Qing did not like that his grandmothers called her A-Qing — she said it was too much like they had adopted her. Wei Wuxian was not going to be the one to tell her that they had — her, her brother and her entire family. To immortals, even Wen-popo was a child.

“This isn’t who I wanted to be,” he sighed, letting the real problem slip through, how he felt like someone else every time he sat down at that desk and calculated his approach to intersect relations. Wei Wuxian was meant to calculate things like the amount of power to put behind a talisman, or the correct distance between vegetables in the garden. The number of knots needed to make Lan Zhan a new belt out of silver cord, or the length of rope to make a harness for Lan Zhan’s torso and have enough left over to immobilize his arms. Not *politics*. “I can’t help but feel like if I’m going to start a new war with every letter I write.”

“You think I’d be less likely to?” Waipo asked, which — no. She was as likely to hide her opinions as a cat. “You have people you can trust, and you’re listening to them. You’re learning. None of us ever grow into the person we think we will, but that doesn’t mean you won’t like who you become.”

“You’re right, Lan Zhan won’t let me insult a sect leader no matter how much they deserve it.” He thought about that and corrected himself. “Or rather, Lan Zhan won’t let me start a war, and Wen Qing won’t let me insult anyone. But Waipoooo, stop being reasonable, I’m trying to complain.”

She stifled a laugh, but that was the goal. It was exactly what she needed, and what he needed too.

The conundrum of his disciples’ martial education began to sort itself out with the arrival of a rogue cultivator seeking a position as an instructor. The new teacher, Xie Yijie, came on the recommendation of Song Lan, for their skill with a sword. They — either Tā character, written — were qualified not only to provide the instruction in basic swordsmanship that book-learned An Yulun needed, but also to meld the styles of the other, variably educated disciples. They’d been a guest teacher at several temple sects in the past, and were now looking to settle down in their middle age.

That was several pleasant surprises wrapped in one, the universe choosing to make his life easier and give him an update on his martial uncle. Naturally, there had to be a catch. “Oh, do you know my Shishu? Xiao Xingchen?”

“I do not, but Song Zichen is a taciturn man. I learned very little of him while we were liberating the ghost beyond his skill with a sword,” they said.

Odd that Song Lan was not traveling with Xiao Xingchen.

“He also gave me this letter,” Xie Yijie handed over a scroll bound with a ribbon.

The ribbon hissed as he pulled the ribbon binding it free, releasing a wispy little dragon made of light, indicating the letter had been unopened.

*My friend*, the letter began.

Wei Wuxian snorted at the use of the endearment, not exactly Song Lan's style, but he was attempting to be circumspect, in case the letter fell into the wrong hands.

*I hear you have been dragged into the world of conniving and backstabbing gentry. Good luck with that. For whatever reason, this cultivator Xie Yijie would like a position in that world, and it sounds like you have an opening. I vouch for their skill with a blade, and their disinterest in rumor. You may judge their trustworthiness for yourself.*

*To the point: My partner and I have temporarily separated to trail a disturbance we identified shortly after we parted. I am as yet unsure whether it has anything to do with events at Yueyang. Xue Yang is dead. We all saw it. But this energy is strangely familiar, though if anything the energy feels like his. And yet, not. The trail wandered for some time, leaving desiccated bodies and mindless fierce corpses in its path. But then, to our shame, we lost it. We thought it best to split up. Now, I believe I have found the trail, a more sophisticated fierce corpse picking off travelers on the border of Lanling.*

*Please give your Shishu my best when you see him.*

There was no other sign off. Or information, just the recommendation of this new teacher — for Song Lan, practically glowing — and the update that his Shishu and his cultivation partner had thought it a great idea to separate while chasing some new demonic cultivator across the Cultivation World.

How reassuring.

But that was Song Lan. When they were traveling together with Wen Qing in search of the Yin Iron, Shishu had told him of the time Song Lan hid a wound fever for three days when a bit of spiritual energy would easily have healed him. There was no way to tell if he needed help.

And he implied Wei Wuxian might see Xiao Xingchen before he did. Perhaps someday soon he might come to visit, once he heard how Wei Ying had established himself in the cultivation world. And then leave again, because he couldn't see Xiao Xingchen wanting anything to do with it.

Xie Yijie had a surprisingly playful teaching style, and that inspired Wei Wuxian with the sort of curriculum he needed to turn his disciples from a rag-tag bunch into an effective team.

Wei Wuxian had helped teach young disciples before. Inexperienced adults were stubborn in a different way, but they needed to learn the same things. With kids, it was a matter of making learning fun. The exercises simply needed reframing, so the students didn't feel like they were being treated like five-year-olds.

So a scavenger hunt to locate traces of energy for a prize might become a tracking exercise, a competition where the prize was first pick of treats brought up from the town bakery. Review

games might become spirited debates. And why cling to a single style, when one disciple might be suited to agility, and another to strength?

There was no sudden shift, but almost imperceptibly, a sect began to grow up around them.

Wei Wuxian still did not want to be a sect leader — but what good sect leader stayed one forever? Someday, he could pass down the mantle and become the young-at-heart immortal who popped in on occasion to play tricks on his successors.

One morning as he returned from consulting with Wen Ning over the use of the caverns, Wei Wuxian walked by the training courtyard and found Lan Zhan had joined Xie Yijie in training their disciples. The rogue cultivators and those from other sects still clung to the forms of their early training. However, they already moved more easily, their training building upon what they had already learned, rather than discarded entirely.

Lan Zhan corrected a disciple's stance, patiently explaining that the correct position would become muscle memory eventually if he self-corrected when he noticed the problem. He demonstrated how easy it was to send the disciple stumbling and his sword flying with such a weak stance, and the disciples finally started to focus.

Rather suddenly, Wei Wuxian realized how long it had been since he last wielded Suibian, how long since he last sparred with his husband with swords of the non-metaphorical sort. Wei Wuxian pulled Lan Zhan away, as soon as the morning class ended, and the disciples ran off to wash themselves in the stream.

“Spar with me, Lan Zhan, it's been a while.” He whispered in Lan Zhan's ear, and jerked back to avoid the first slash of Bichen. Grinning, Wei Wuxian led his husband on a chase through the woods, exhilarated to finally feel like himself again.

Lan Zhan finished the fight with a dirty trick. Biting Wei Wuxian's ear when they were pressed up against each other, he hooked his heel around Wei Wuxian's, and sent them both crashing to the ground. Lan Zhan looked very pleased with himself lying atop him, and even more pleased after Wei Wuxian left love bites all over his neck in revenge. Always so eager for him, his Lan Zhan.

So diligent, too, reading all of the books Wei Wuxian had given him like an assignment, rather than resources to guide his discovery, that they could talk about and act on whenever he wanted. He was thorough, leaving notes with color-coded dots of paint within the pages.

Wei Wuxian had made the first move, handing him the books, and Lan Zhan was taking his time building a thorough list. He didn't even sneak a peak, though he did spend a little longer riling him up at the end of each day. It was a bit of a game in itself, and if Wei Wuxian wanted more, he also relished the anticipation.

And then, one day, Wei Wuxian woke to an empty room — not uncommon, with Lan Zhan such an early riser — and a list of books and page numbers on his desk.

Wei Wuxian decided to start simple. Judging limits was a difficult challenge without practical experience on either of their parts. He expected they would have missteps in their games, that there might be kinks that sounded wonderful in theory but didn't feel right in practice, techniques that needed adaptation. But he wanted this first experiment to be good for both of them, so both of them might feel more comfortable confiding if one wasn't.

With the right tools, temperature play felt like a reasonable starting point. Using massage oil and a heating talisman, he could adjust the temperature based on Lan Zhan's reactions without risking burns. Easy to stop if Lan Zhan wasn't enjoying himself, and enough freedom to experiment.

Best, too, for the first time he bound a person he cared about to be easily undone. He tied Lan Zhan to the bed with the simplest of column knots, anchoring each limb to a corner so he lay spread-eagled on his back before him. Lan Zhan pulled on the bonds, testing them, and lay limp, looking up at him from beneath half lidded eyes.

His cock was already half-hard, though Wei Wuxian had yet to touch him aside from his wrists and ankles.

He tested the oil's temperature with a finger and sniffed it. Sandalwood-scented, just the way Lan Zhan liked, and about the temperature of a hot spring, contrasting nicely with the chill of the mountain air.

Satisfied with his preparations, Wei Wuxian straddled his hips, situating himself so Lan Zhan couldn't effectively grind up against him. He leaned down, pecked his husband on the lips, and murmured in his ear, "What do you say if you need me to stop?"

"... Turtle," Lan Zhan said, after a pause. It had been Lan Zhan's own idea, after Wei Wuxian heard his original word, "bunny", and asked if Lan Zhan *really* wouldn't like it if Wei Wuxian called him that in bed. Lan Zhan's ears answered that question for him.

"Something simple and not at all arousing," he'd reminded Lan Zhan, and he immediately replied with *turtle*. Sensing a story, Wei Wuxian demanded an explanation, and laughed so hard he cried when one was provided. Of course Lan Zhan would insist on calling a monster by its proper name and then end up using the in-joke in his head.

"Good boy." He bit Lan Zhan's ear lightly, dragging his teeth along the lobe as he sat back on his heels. "Now, you're not going to move. You're going to lie there no matter what I do to you. Do you think you can do that?"

Lan Zhan nodded.

"If you're sure," he teased, tilting the oil to let a few droplets fall directly onto a nipple.

Lan Zhan sucked in a sharp breath, his thighs tensing beneath him.

Another drip, on the other, and his hips tried to jerk up, held down by Wei Wuxian's position. Pre-cum beaded on the tip of his cock. He didn't censure him for moving, not yet.



His instincts had been right to tie Lan Zhan on his back, this time. Couldn't have him grinding into the mattress and coming without permission, which would be far too easy on his front, when Lan Zhan didn't yet have experience holding off. Lan Zhan hadn't yet indicated an interest in punishment, but too many of the games he'd indicated overlapped with pain that Wei Ying thought it likely he hadn't worked up the courage to include it just yet.

But oh, he had so many ideas.

Lan Zhan whimpered so prettily. Wei Wuxian wanted to make him scream.

Later.

Today was about spoiling his husband. Tying him down where he couldn't escape, to be pampered as he deserved, and never had been. By the rules of his sect and his own need to attain an impossible ideal.

Setting the jar aside, Wei Wuxian spread the oil, rubbed it between his hands, and focused his attention on the muscle of Lan Zhan's chest, kneading it in until the skin glistened. The scent of sandalwood filled the room. Lan Zhan was all tension, a lifetime of carrying himself with a stiff, proscribed posture at his back, and as soon as Wei Ying dug into a knot between his ribs, he melted.

Little sighs escaped him as Wei Wuxian took his time to thoroughly explore his muscles. When Lan Zhan's eyes slipped closed and stayed there, he sucked one of his nipples into his mouth, tugging on it with his teeth, and poured a few more drops of oil into the crook of Lan Zhan's neck.

Lan Zhan bucked against his bonds, chest arching off the mattress.

"Ah-ah-ah," he wagged a finger over Lan Zhan's gaze, "What did I tell you?"

Lan Zhan followed the path of his finger hungrily with his eyes, his tongue darting out to lick his lips. But Wei Wuxian needed both of his hands today.

"Verbal answers only. What's the one thing I told you to do?" His disappointment was exaggerated, if not fabricated entirely. Lan Zhan's struggle to remember, to drag himself back from the sensations that had suddenly stopped, were exactly what he'd hoped for.

"Don't move," he finally said.

"So you do remember." Wei Wuxian sighed mournfully. "You said you could do it. Did you lie to me, Hanguang-jun? Do you want me to stop?"

Lan Zhan's eyes widened. "No, no. I can do it."

Wei Wuxian smoothed his hair back from his face, ignoring the oil that transferred from his fingers. There was a warm bath waiting for them for later. "Lie still, Hanguang-jun. I'm taking care of you, you just have to lie there. Have a little patience. Good boys get rewards. Are you going to be good now?"

“Yes,” Lan Zhan swallowed heavily as Wei Wuxian coated his hands in a bit more oil, working to get out the words. “I’ll be good for you.”

He worked his fingers into the spaces between the vertebrae of his neck, pushing lightly, teasing the stiffness from his neck. Then moved down his shoulders, his upper arms, everywhere he could reach.

He’d have to do this again with Lan Zhan on his stomach, maybe with a plug in his ass that he played with periodically, that stayed in whether or not Lan Zhan got himself off by mistake. If his ribs were this bad, his back must be a disaster.

Maybe he’d rub Lan Zhan’s back when the game was over for the night because Lan Zhan was his husband. And he *could*.

Lan Zhan’s cock was dripping by the time Wei Wuxian finally worked his way down to his belly and the soft flesh of his thighs. Here, he spilled trails of oil, every burst of heat on the sensitive skin making Lan Zhan jump. He tried not to, at first, but his breath grew rapid when he failed.

This time, Wei Wuxian was gentle. Neither of them really knew their limits. This was not the time to test them. There would be plenty of time for that later. “You’ve done so well, stayed so still for me. You can let go now, tug on your bonds, squirm for me, come when you’re ready. I have you, you’re safe.”

And squirm he did, as Wei Wuxian continued his ministrations, dripping oil into the indent at the top of his thighs, on either side of his cock, so it dripped down between his cheeks.

“I — I nnngh,”

Whatever Lan Zhan was trying to say was cut off when Wei Wuxian dipped four fingers into the remaining massage oil, and wrapped his hand, still hot, around Lan Zhan’s cock.

He came with a shout instantly.

Wei Wuxian admired the contortions of his face, his mouth open, eyes screwed shut, so very expressive. Watching Lan Zhan fall apart under him, because of him, sent a thrill through him that lingered in his limbs. That Lan Zhan let him see him like this, let Wei Wuxian be the one to give him what he needed, made him feel like he could fly on a cloud into the highest reaches of the heavens.

It hadn’t been his goal to send Lan Zhan into that floaty space the books described today, and he didn’t seem to have gone there. He looked sleepy but clear-eyed, lying relaxed in his bonds like he intended to fall asleep right there. His gaze traveled down from Wei Wuxian’s face, over his bare chest, and down to his cock, standing ignored and at attention.

He frowned. “You haven’t…”

“This was about you, Lan Zhan.” Wei Wuxian felt no urgency, the rush of success still filling him, a sort of power more satisfying than any of the deep reserves at his fingertips. Reserves

that came from hard work and necessity rather than real choice. *This* was power he'd chosen.

Lan Zhan pouted, and he realized why. There were no motives behind this other than pleasure, and their choice to exchange it.

Unless you want something I haven't given you. A treat for being so good. Perhaps my Hanguang-jun isn't dirty enough." He did so like to be made a mess of. "You like having my cum all over you. Maybe one day, I'll let you have it inside, plug you up to keep it in. Fuck you again later, at my convenience. Or maybe you'd like to feel me dripping down your thighs while you try to focus on your work."

Looking into Lan Zhan's eyes, Wei Wuxian jerked himself off lazily, taking his time. But who was he to last in the face of his husband, disheveled and beautiful in his afterglow? He came all over his chest, and Lan Zhan sighed, closing his eyes, a hint of a smile on his lips.

It was short work to undo Lan Zhan's bonds. He'd made marks on his wrists in pulling against his bonds, but the feeling and motion remained in his fingertips, and the rope's indentations would be gone by morning. Lan Zhan was all loose limbs and dead weight when Wei Wuxian shifted him to lie against his chest, rubbing the parts of his back he hadn't been able to reach before.

Lan Zhan protested when he tried to move him to grab a cloth and water, but he stretched just far enough to reach it.

Lan Zhan's chest still shone with oil when Wei Ying lay down on it, their hands tangling together. Though he was usually hesitant with touch, Lan Zhan needed lots of contact after sex, like it was the only time he dared ask for it.

Wei Wuxian held him close, soaking in the privilege of being Lan Zhan's confidant while it was still his to savor.

## Chapter End Notes

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 14

## Chapter Summary

It's Lan Wangji's turn to get advice from Waipo, Jin Guangshan continues to be horrible, and Wangxian break in their new bed

## Chapter Notes

Thank you all very much for 1000 kudos! 💕💕💕 If you received like five comment replies from me in the past few days it's because I finished a stressful work thing on Monday and finally had the time/energy to reply 😊

**CW:** denial of medical treatment by an employer for ableist reasons (jgs to unnamed OCs)  
for the smut: bondage, riding, facefucking, goes from "They broke in their new bed" to the end of the chapter

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

In his youth, there had been exactly one person with whom Lan Wangji always knew how to interact. Xiongzhong, he had always thought, knew him where no one else had.

But it turned out there were things Lan Wangji could not confide even in his brother. Though he would try to limit Xiongzhong's fears, he could not see a way to share the truth of his relationship until the culprit behind the theft of the Yin Iron had been revealed.

When Xiongzhong's first letter arrived, he found himself stumped as to how to reply.

*I hope you are as well as can be expected. It is the duty of this older brother to worry, for I know your tendency to suffer in silence well. Please describe to me your days, and help me to assuage my worries, a little. Is the Yiling Laozu allowing you your night hunts? Have you taken up the standard duties of a sect leader's spouse? Are the Burial Mounds truly free of resentment?*

*But I have dwelt too long on my concerns. You must also wish to know of the Cloud Recesses. Rebuilding began during the war, as you know, and we returned to find something of a chaotic scene. Too partially constructed buildings insufficient to house all our disciples and the workers brought up from Caiyi Town and surrounding villages. The work goes more quickly now, and with Nie Mingjue due to arrive in a few days, our calligraphers may be freed to begin work on restoring the library.*

*Shufu has been driven spare by the noise, but he is otherwise in good health. I believe part of him relishes the excuse to yell. He complains, multiple times a day, of the inefficiency and clumsiness of youth, but I often see a sparkle in his eye. That sparkle, may, admittedly, have something to do with his hopes for grand-nieces and nephews. He insisted on my asking whether you have yet given thought to adoption.*

*I include this question only on Shufu's insistence. Even if the Yiling Laozu is not what I believe him to be, please do not rush into such a commitment. Even if you live forever, you are only truly young once. There is space within the disciplines to enjoy your youth.*

*I find the simple work healing, almost meditative, after the horrors of war and slaughter. I find even the mistakes our inexperienced builders of disciples make to be more a source of entertainment than stress. Our distant cousin split a board in half when a worker she's been eyeing winked at her. One of our outer disciples, Du Fengqi, who I suspect you do not recall, fell through a wall under construction and sent it tumbling down, and was completely uninjured. I had to hide my laughter both times, for it does not do for a sect leader to laugh at their disciples, but, oh, it felt good to laugh.*

*Whatever other troubles there may be in the world, the war is over. I hope I will not see its like in my lifetime.*

Lan Wangji was not certain even that last was true, though he was pleased to learn that the return to ordinary life had been good for Xiongzhong. The questions he asked, however, had no easy answer.

Lan Wangji had not, in fact, gone on a night hunt since their arrival in Yiling after the war. He had been too busy even to think about it. Not because his husband would not permit it, of course, but what could he say?

*No Xiongzhong, I haven't been night hunting because what little free time I have is spent with my husband. Talking — Xiongzhong would not believe how much he talked in a day, now, comparatively — sparring, kissing. Begging him to tie me up.*

No, he could not write anything of the sort. Xiongzhong would, again, think him confused. Altered by the Yiling Laozu. It would be a lie to say he had not been, but only in ways he wished.

Yiling was peaceful, for the moment, though he should suggest night hunting together when the opportunity arose. Preferably without the disciples, to feel the exhilaration of fighting side by side with Wei Ying without war to dampen it. But the disciples did need their experience.

Lan Wangji shifted in the chair, savoring the ache of the previous night's activities. There had been no props, just Wei Ying, laying him down and fucking him slowly to orgasm and then to a decadent, wanton overstimulation. Whispering praises so sweet Lan Wangji could almost believe he meant something by them all the while.

Outside Wei Ying's cottage on the mountain, children screeched and giggled as they ran up the steps. It was so peaceful here, with Wei Ying slumbering in the bed, sprawling to take up

the space he had vacated. But while they would soon move into the partially constructed palace, this retreat would still be here when they wanted it.

It was difficult to wrap his mind around Shufu's tentative approval, much less his sudden desire for grandchildren. But it was far from an unwelcome thought. Adoption *had* crossed his mind more than once.

But in this, Xiongzhong was correct. He wanted Wei Ying to himself for a while longer. He had only just begun to discover the ways Wei Ying could play his body, as he plucked chords on his guqin. Something told him time for that exploration would be difficult to come by once small children could come calling at any hour.

Still, he did not intend to wait very long, and neither, he thought, did Wei Ying. No word had yet arrived of the fate of A-Yuan and A-Xi's parents, and Wei Ying interacted wished to take them in when peace was more certain.

Now was also a better time to begin cultivating toward immortality, toward becoming Wei Ying's match in every sense of the word. Toward becoming someone Wei Ying might allow himself to love without restraint.

But would he look like Wei Ying's father by the time he achieved that goal?

Lan Wangji knelt quietly in the cave at a respectful distance from Baoshan Sanren. Her eyes were closed in meditation, with Lan Yi hovering, unchanged, a short distance away. Lan Wangji did not wish to disturb what peace she had managed to find.

"Are you just going to sit there staring at me?" Baoshan Sanren cracked open a single eye. "That's more distracting than children playing, and they shriek."

Lan Wangji felt himself flush; this family he had married into had a talent for that.

"I seek your assistance —" he was not entirely sure how to address her now. Propriety was never what he expected it to be, here.

She chuckled, patting him on the knee. "Waipo. Call me Waipo, now that you've married my grandson."

"Waipo." He tasted the word on his tongue, a strange flavor, with his family having been so devoid of immediate elders. Never having known his mother's family at all. "I would like to request your assistance in becoming my husband's equal."

She furrowed her brow. "What do you mean?"

He had not expected a need for further explanation. Wei Ying was so clearly without peer. Perhaps, an example. "You have heard of the infectious puppets in the war?"

She nodded.

“We managed to heal one of the infected, once. But I collapsed, and he would not try again.” It had not been the most judicious use of spiritual energy during the war, true. But they could do so much more together if Lan Wangji were stronger.

“There’s nothing to be ashamed of.” Baoshan Sanren shifted to face him by lifting herself, cross-legged with her arms and turning at the waist. “A-Xian had the advantage of immortals for teachers, who very much do not want to lose him to age. Your level of skill is well matched — you’re the first person in years other than me to come to a draw in a sword match against him.”

“But I am not yet his match.” Lan Wangji looked down at his lap, stilling his fingers when he noticed them fidgeting. “I would like to be his cultivation partner in truth, if I may.”

“A-Xian would not see it that way.” Baoshan Sanren said.

“Still. I would not wish to leave Wei Ying alone.” For much of his life, Lan Wangji had heard whispers of how he was destined for an isolated immortality atop a lonely mountaintop. Wei Ying did not deserve that fate, to stay forever young watching everyone he loved live and die without a companion to weather the losses alongside him. Lan Wangji had never wanted it either.

She squinted to inspect him, and he bore it without flinching. Finally, she nodded, satisfied. “There are techniques that may help, but I’m afraid the process of achieving immortality varies from person to person. If you are still interested?”

He nodded.

“You’re good for him. Steady.” She tapped her chin, thinking, and his spine straightened with pride. “Techniques, techniques. Dual cultivation is one, which I believe you are already using.”

He flushed again. His grandmother-in-law did not.

“There is more you can do, never fear.” She held out her hands toward him, palm up. “Take my hands. Meditate as you usually do, but let the connection of our energy flow through you.”

This, at least, was familiar, a method used to teach trickier techniques, so a student did not get bogged down by unhelpful habits. He did as she asked, breathing slowly until his nerves quieted and the path of her energy through him came into focus. He followed its route, passive, until her method click clicked.

It wasn’t a miracle, just a focused meditation meant to prepare his core for the transition beyond mortal limits.

“Something else troubles you,” Baoshan Sanren said, when she was satisfied he could repeat the process.

“A letter from my brother has arrived, and I find I do not know what to say.” But he must reply, and soon, or Xiongzhong would only worry more.

“Why, the truth, of course.” She turned back to the form of her wife, a clear dismissal. “Or a version of it.”

Seated again at the desk that evening, the words flowed from his brush. Wei Ying sat on the floor, leaning on his leg as he squinted at two letters at once.

*Please do not worry. I am not confined in any way.*

Save those ways he wanted, he did not include.

*My current focus is on assisting my husband in establishing the Yiling Wei, and on my cultivation. However, I plan to lead our disciples on a night hunt once we identify an appropriate target. They are young and eager, and I wish to devise a challenge they can handle. Guiding disciples is a different sort of challenge than liberating ghosts myself, but I find I like it. My husband says that my peers may think me lofty, but those same qualities lead to wide-eyed adoration in those younger than myself, if only by a few years.*

*My husband flatters me often. Will you think less of me if I do not stop him?*

*I am pleased to hear of the progress toward rebuilding the Cloud Recesses, as well as of your improved mood, and Shufu's good health. I wish our distant cousin success in her courtship, and hope the clumsy disciple has been moved to text copying duty. I remember him, a little, and he would be better suited there.*

*Here, too, we spend much of our time in building efforts. The palace of the Yiling Laozu will be a splendor when it is complete — our architect, Wen Ning, has plans from which he will not be dissuaded. I know you took note of Wen Ning's surname, Xiongzhong. He is Wen Qing's brother, and a promising, gentle young man who lets children climb all over him.*

*These, mind you, are the children of our workers, who are watched together while their parents work. Please inform Shufu that if he can be patient until matters are more settled, we will adopt grandchildren for him to spoil. As you say, Xiongzhong, now is not the correct time. With the theft of the Yin Iron hanging over our heads, we cannot truly begin to settle down. Even so, there are many things to enjoy here.*

*I have enclosed tokens for you and Shufu, as now is not yet an opportune time for my husband and I to pay a visit to my natal sect. When you can more easily support guests, and we can be spared for a few days, I look forward to our visit.*

The tokens were wall decorations made by Wei Ying, though he did not say as much in his letter. When Shufu and Xiongzhong wrote to express their appreciation of the artistry, he would write back that his husband was grateful Lan Wangji's family liked the gifts he had crafted with his own hands.



It would be a slow battle to win Xiongzhong's approval of his marriage, but Lan Wangji intended to wage it, with Shufu for an unexpected ally.

Wei Ying's fingers snuck beneath his pant-leg, tracing their way lightly up his calf. Lan Wangji put down his brush, and allowed Wei Ying to take him to bed.

"What new hell is this?" Wen Qing demanded as the crowd opened for Wei Wuxian's approach. When the summons came, he had been in the midst of writing a reply to Sect Leader Yao full of meaningless flowery metaphors, flattering while promising nothing. Much as he hated it, Wei Wuxian thought he was starting to get the hang of this sect leader nonsense.

He rushed down from the Burial Mounds into town, to find its entire population crowded around the edges of the market square. They gave the center a wide berth, aside from Wen Qing, five figures covered entirely in the off-white and gold of the Jin down to the strip of cloth tied over their noses and mouths. There were rectangles shrouded in cloth, laid out in rows across the square.

It took Wei Wuxian a moment to register what he was seeing. The cloths did not cover the bodies' faces; they were not corpses. But black blood leaked from their mouths. A sight he'd thought he left on the battlefield, returned to haunt him on his own territory.

"What is the meaning of this?" Wei Wuxian demanded. A snaking shadow materialized from beneath his sleeve, striking for the leader of the group, halting with its point just before his throat.

"This is how you treat Xiandu's nephew? Your arrogance knows no bounds, Laozu." The lead figure... whined, like he really didn't think he'd dare. The voice was familiar, but...

Wei Wuxian squinted at his face beneath his hood, the mouth and nose left uncovered, unlike his escort — clearly, *he* hadn't helped in their transport one bit — and vaguely recognized him as that nephew of Jin Guangshan. The one who was immensely annoying in the moment, but easily forgotten after five minutes away.

Wen Qing would remember his name, but he couldn't unobtrusively lean in to ask her now.

He retracted his shadow, and let it twine its way around him instead, a reminder that he *could* tear annoying nephews apart in an instant, if the whim struck him. "Did they confirm Jin Guangshan in the position already? Funny, the invitation said three months after the war."

Annoying Nephew bristled like Wei Wuxian had insulted his most cherished ancestors. "My uncle has already assumed the duties of the Chief Cultivator. He deserves the respect given the title."

"And you think that means you deserve it too? No. Tell Jin-zongzhu that if he wishes to send a family member to greet me, his son will do nicely. Or perhaps an ambassador, if he really wants to improve my impression of him."

One of Annoying Nephew's escort stepped forward. "Perhaps if you bowed and offered —"

"Shut up, Su She, no one asked you." Annoying Nephew directed a high-pitched attempt at a growl over his shoulder. Wow, referred to by birth name *and* snapped at for offering an — admittedly poorly timed — suggestion. Life sucked for a Jin disciple.

"Anyway," Annoying Nephew shrugged, stretching his neck from side to side. "You can do what you want with these. Our most valuable cultivators have permanently depleted cores after receiving the treatment *you* provided, so we're not wasting the effort on this bunch."

"You knew damn well the core damage would be irreversible. The healers knew." Wen Qing looked up from funneling spiritual energy into one of the patients to snap.

The healers likely hadn't revealed that on purpose, to be permitted to treat any of the patients.

Annoying Nephew ignored her outburst. "But in his benevolence, Xiandu wants you to know he doesn't blame you for being unable to fully reverse the effects of Wen Ruohan's deeds. You and Hanguang-jun, wherever you're keeping him, are still invited to next month's crowd hunt in honor of my Uncle's ascension to Chief Cultivator."

Wei Wuxian stared, swallowing back bile as he forced himself to refrain from murdering, as the annoying one had so *helpfully* pointed out — the future Chief Cultivator's nephew. "My husband and I will attend."

Annoying Nephew and most of his escort mounted their swords and sped away at a rate that would force them to slow before they'd even made it out of Wei Wuxian's territory. They had failed to treat all of the infected equally, and now came begging for Wen Qing to clean up their mess. Without a single care for how their transport might hurt the unprepared civilians of Yiling.

One healthy Jin disciple remained behind, watching over the bodies. A surprise, given how quickly their companions had flown away. Wei Wuxian spared them a glance, and went to aid Wen Qing.

The stabilization they had worked so hard to achieve had been permitted to lapse, several of the patients one step away from rising from their sickbeds and heading right for the first warm throat they could find. The state of their decline differed, from patient to patient, and they both knew it was a matter of determining who still had a chance, and who was beyond hope.

Wei Wuxian shoved the soul of one such patient out of what had formerly been his body using the body's own resentment, and turned to Wen Qing, to find her funneling energy into a puppet on the verge of sinking its teeth into her.

"Wen Qing," he said slowly.

"What?" She snarled, her head snapping around to glare at him.

“This one’s already gone.” He reached around her, grabbing her hand to pull it back, and the puppet surged forward. Wen Qing shook him off as she scrawled a talisman in mid-air, and the puppet incinerated, covering her in ash.

They lost twelve of the patients altogether, none of whom would have died if the Jin kept them stabilized. Ghosts rose from the corpses, most fleeting, fewer hesitating. Wei Wuxian asked each a single question.

Only one said “yes” chose to stick around. As a ghost, not a corpse — his body wouldn’t exactly make a pleasant habitation. There was no choice but to burn it.

They burnt the bodies to ash themselves, few enough to be manageable. These people at least, could have rites performed in the absence of a body, they would not be left behind on the march without so much as a marker of their resting place.

Small condolences when their deaths were so senseless.

The patients they stabilized would remain in the square while they underwent treatment, with a covering erected over them, and the area cordoned off to the inconvenience of the townspeople.

Better an inconvenience than the infection of non-cultivators, who could not survive it.

Wen Qing was not in the least bit okay after all of this, did not even have the reassurance of watching souls choose to depart for what came next. But Wen Ning had heard what was happening and arrived to collect her. He’d make sure she ate, and remembered life was more than death, listen if she wanted to talk. Which she wouldn’t — Wei Wuxian had pieced together the things Wen Ruohan demanded of her from acerbic commentary, not heartfelt admissions.

Only when Wen Qing had walked off arm in arm with her brother did he notice the remaining Jin disciple’s presence.

Huh. He would have expected the Jin cultivator to have gone running back to her master already. They were usually so easy to upset, Mianmian excluded.

“Just who are you?” He affected the drawn-out syllables of the Yiling Laozu. “Sticking around to spy for Jin-zongzhu? Not too disappointed we didn’t burn those poor cultivators alive, I hope.”

“Of course you don’t remember, Laozu only has eyes for Hanguang-jun.” The disciple said, under her breath. “This one is Xia Jiayi, the cultivator you saved from the infection, together with Hanguang-jun.”

“Oh! The one who called me out for staring at my beautiful husband-to-be.” It was always good to know people he’d saved were doing well, even if they were an agent of the enemy. And it wasn’t like he didn’t have a reputation for erratic mood swings. It probably hadn’t even been this disciple’s decision to join the Jin sect rather, but the chance of birthplace.

“I was calling out both you and Hanguang-jun for being besotted with each other.” She said, and belatedly, “Laozu.”

If only the townspeople around here forgot to be respectful so easily. Then maybe Wen Ning wouldn’t have quite so much money to build the monstrosity of a palace Wei Wuxian had glimpsed in his plans, like he thought the Yiling Wei Sect would really last.

At least Wen Ning was happy.

“Ah, Lan Zhan wasn’t looking at me that way, he was about to faint. I’d appreciate it if you don’t mention how *I* was looking at him to anyone. When you go back to Koi Tower or if you ever happen to meet Lan Zhan, for that matter. Call it a small favor of little importance.” In exchange for saving your life, he didn’t add, because he would have done that anyway.

“Back to Koi Tower, are you joking?” Xia Jiayi snorted, again impolite. Wei Wuxian decided he liked her. “After Jin-zongzhu ordered all efforts to help these patients abandoned when he realized they’d lose their use to him? I don’t think so. You saved a friend’s life today, and eased another’s passing.”

“You don’t blame me for not helping all of the infected, back during the war?” Wei Wuxian couldn’t have, but blame was rarely rational. He often caught himself wondering if there was something he might have done differently, though he knew there wasn’t. It would have required some future version of Lan Zhan, his Golden Core grown to match Wei Wuxian’s, to even make a dent in the numbers. And still, curing them would have had to wait until the war’s end, by which time many of the patients’ cores would already have been consumed.

“I pay more attention to the opinions of my comrades in arms and the evidence of my own eyes than the opinion of a despot.” Xia Jiayi said. “You help where you can, but even a powerful man can only do so much.”

“That’s a more charitable opinion than I deserve.” Apparently, he hadn’t managed to convince everyone of his villainy in the war camp. He wondered where he’d gone wrong.

“I’m hoping for a position in your sect,” she said.

There was a non-negligible chance that Xia Jiayi was lying, that they were there to infiltrate his sect. But it would be so much easier to slip a spy disguised as a rogue cultivator in among his students than to pretend a defection. He felt certain at least one of those he’d turned away for their obsession with demonic cultivation had been a prospective spy.

The truly sensitive information was shared only with Wen Qing and Waipo anyway, some of it with Lan Zhan.

“That can be arranged,” he said.

Xia Jiayi meshed well with Xie Yijie as a second instructor, with a more formal background in classics and arts than them. Together, they began to follow the movements of Wei

Wuxian's own practices, to better pass down a style that did not belong to any other master.

Once they healed, the surviving victims of the puppet infection had no desire to return to the sect that abandoned them. Neither did they have the strength of golden core or muscle remaining to excel at cultivation or physical tasks. A niche they could fill, however, was assistants for Wen Qing.

With their reduced golden cores, they would never be able to pull off her miracles. But they could heal small injuries with practice, and provide mundane support. It was a way to continue cultivating that suited their current capacities, and a way to preserve endangered knowledge. Five stayed, including Xia Jiayi's friend. The other three departed to make their own way.

The suite of rooms belonging to the sect leader and his husband were completed at the height of summer, built flush against the rock of the Burial Mounds. Wen Ning planned to one day add a tunnel to permit their escape, if attacked. Wei Ying confided to Lan Wangji that he was certain Wen Ning just wanted to build some secret tunnels.

It was sparsely decorated, but compete, though additional private buildings surrounding a courtyard would be erected later, their foundations marking the space for the moment. Inside, there were three rooms. A bedroom and a study, which could be opened to each other with a folding door, and a small alcove. Lan Wangji opened it to find cushions on the floor in soft shades of blue.

He turned to Wei Ying, a silent question on his lips.

"For you, when you want to meditate, or just need some peace and quiet." Wei Ying said, unnecessarily shy. As Lan Wangji proved when he kissed him so hard they stumbled back into the recently installed shelving, and knocked one as yet-empty shelf down.

"I guess that means you like it," Wei Ying said, laughing as he fiddled with the shelf before finally slotting it back into place.

There was a bed now, long and wide enough they ran no risk of falling off no matter how creative they got, with a small square table next to it. A single decorative knot hung on the wall above it, a pair of dragons of delicate string, Lan Wangji's favorite work of Wei Ying's yet, though he had no idea where he'd found the time to make it. The shelves held a few changes of clothing, the book Lan Wangji was halfway through, and the one he planned to read next. A folding screen constructed and painted by a pair of Wei Wuxian's shigus, depicting a peaceful lake on the edge of a forest with snow-white birds flocking above it, otters playing in the water, a fox lapping at its edge, and deer frolicking between the trees. It was a masterpiece of a wedding gift from those who had not even had the opportunity to attend.

Lan Wangji would take care of Wei Ying for them, he promised himself.

As Wei Ying took care of him.

They broke in their new bed at the Burial Mounds with a modified version of one of Lan Wangji's earliest fantasies.

Lan Wangji knelt on the bed, Wei Ying's hands brushing teasingly across his skin as he prepared him. His heart raced with anticipation. It never seemed to stop racing, when Wei Ying was touching him. Perhaps he should simply stop noticing it all together, direct all his focus toward the flutter of fingertips and the drag of rope.

Wei Ying was getting gradually more complex in his rope workings, this time anchoring Lan Wangji to himself rather than the bed. He began by tying a belt of rope around Lan Wangji's waist, then feeding the rope through his legs, tied so it formed a perfect diamond around his cock. He added loops around his wrists that felt too loose at first, until Wei Ying tugged on them, testing the way they pulled against the bumps where the bones of his arms began, and in the other direction toward where his hands widened.

"Don't pout, Lan Zhan," he whispered in his ear. "You'll be more upset if we have to stop because you've lost feeling in your hands."

He deepened his pout, knowing it would make Wei Ying groan, and bite Lan Wangji's lower lip. Distracting him into a kiss that lasted longer than either of them intended. When Wei Ying drew back, he bit his lip again, in retaliation for his misbehavior.

As a final touch, Wei Ying secured his wrists to his waist like handles, all the better for Wei Ying to maneuver him as he wished.

What he wished was to push Lan Wangji onto his back and leave him there, to realize what Wei Ying intended all on his own. He couldn't reach up and touch, no matter how much he wanted it to be his fingers Wei Ying clenched around as he worked himself open above him. His head thrown back, making soft, breathy noises as he took his time pleasuring himself. He shifted minutely, against his bonds, hoping the movement would draw Wei Ying's attention back to him, but he only felt himself begin to slip into dreamlike unreality at the dig of the rope into wrist and thigh, the rough scrape between his cheeks.

Wei Ying said nothing, gave no orders, as though he'd forgotten Lan Wangji was even there. He felt like a voyeur, watching unseen and unknown, invisible beneath him. Lan Wangji was transfixed by a bead of pre-cum dripping from Wei Ying's cock to land on his belly.

It was a shock when Wei Ying opened his eyes and looked down at him, grabbing hold of his cock, coating it with the lubricant already on his hands before positioning it at his entrance. As Wei Ying sank down on him, his eyes closed and the dark world spun around him like he'd been dropped into a whirlpool. He held him down by the shoulders, and began to move.

He could not last long, with Wei Ying riding him, not when Wei Ying did not order him to hold off, only went faster, purposefully clenching, when Lan Wangji made a garbled attempt to call out a warning. His moan shattered the silence as Wei Ying rode him through his orgasm.

"Oh, Hanguang-jun," Wei Ying clicked his tongue, his tone disappointed, when Lan Wangji stilled beneath him. "You came so early. How are you going to make up for this?"

Lan Wangji licked his lips, mouth dry, unable to speak, mind so blissfully blank he could not summon a single one of his fantasies of pleasing Wei Ying.

“If you can’t speak, maybe your mouth has another use.” Still seated on Lan Wangji’s softened cock, he trailed his hands down his chest, and finally slotted his hands into Lan Wangji’s. “Will that make up for it, Lan Zhan? Squeeze my hands, that’s a good boy.”

Wei Ying lifted off him, Lan Wangji’s cum dripping obscenely from his hole. He barely had time to appreciate it before he found himself lifted by the elbows to lean against the wall. Wei Ying straddled him again, shoving his cock into Lan Wangji’s mouth. He used him, as Lan Wangji had wanted him to that very first time. His throat relaxed around him, now, and he breathed through his nose, tears springing to his eyes at the intrusion.

Through the blur, he saw Wei Ying’s fingers disappearing behind him. Wei Ying moaned as he resumed his attentions to his prostate. “It could have been your cock, not my fingers making me come, Hanguang-jun. You feel so much better, stretching me out around you, filling me up. Next time, you’ll last longer.”

He tried to make a noise of agreement as Wei Ying thrust in again, and Wei Ying made a choked sound at the vibrations around his cock. His mouth filled with cum, and he swallowed compulsively. Wei Ying thrust deep once more in response to the sensation, before shallowing and finally withdrawing entirely. He sank down to press their foreheads together, kissing him sweetly.

“Ah, Lan Zhan. That was perfect.”

Lan Wangji let himself drift, rousing to the feeling of a cloth wiping his face, his wrists already freed.

“Tea?” Wei Ying asked, and poured a cup from the pot he’d prepared in advance on the bedside table.

Not yet ready to speak, Lan Wangji nodded, and Wei Ying tilted the cup against his lips. The floral taste of jasmine flooded his tongue, sharpening his senses.


When he had drunk the whole cup in sips, he cleared his throat, and said, “This variety is expensive.”

“You were so good for me, you deserve a treat.” Wei Ying kissed him, briefly, which would always be a better treat, no matter how many times he did it. “I know it’s your favorite. You are many things Lan Zhan, but in your taste in tea, you’re positively transparent. A good thing, I like knowing the little ways to make you happy.”

If he wasn’t careful, Lan Wangji would start believing he meant it.

I hope these past few chapters haven't been too boring, the plot will be moving forward shortly!

[Promo Tweet](#)

**Please read before commenting:** On this fic and my last, I've received the occasional comment that's made me uncomfortable, particularly wishing violence/corporal punishment on Lan Xichen. I don't want to made anyone feel bad about having done this -- I got the impression the commenters who've done this enjoyed the fic, and didn't mean anything by it -- and I don't mind expression of frustration toward Lan Xichen or any other character! To be clear, the suggestions of how JGS should die were funny (so many of you wanted him to melt!) so please feel free to keep doing that. Just no suggestions of things I'm only cool with in a consensual BDSM context on characters for being a protective older brother/making a mistake please! I really do appreciate everyone who's commented, thank you!!! 



# Chapter 15

## Chapter Summary

Nothing goes as planned (except orgasms)

## Chapter Notes

Hi hello I did not mean to take this long to update it turns out vacation with my parents as an adult is exhausting (we had fun, but exhausting) Also the device I brought instead of my laptop is barely functional and I can't access my outline from it :(((. I am updating from said device today because I have a few more days of (solo) vacation left, so any extra mistakes are due to that!

**CW:** mentions of an off-screen massacre, also mention of autoerotic asphyxiation, smut from "What number comes next?" to "I woke up this morning," features impact play and lwj asking for something (choking) that turns out to be one of wwx's limits (extra spoilery warning for wwx thinking about inventing a talisman to give lwj the feeling he wants while removing the part wwx isn't into, since that's not a real thing)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The fisherman whistled offkey as he cast his net into the river again. The catch had been thin that day, but he wasn't concerned. No one went hungry in Yiling these days. On the opposite bank of the Yangtze River, a water deer dipped its head to drink. He paid it little mind, thoughts drifting toward his wife's pearl meatballs, which would be waiting when he came home.

A splash caught his attention, and he looked up just in time to witness the deer disappearing beneath the ripples, dark, inky limbs dragging it down.

He stared, blinking at the space where the deer had been.

Something broke free of the surface and lunged.

Frantic, he scrambled back, and the water ghouel slammed into the dirt in the space he'd vacated. It slunk back into the water, taking his meagre catch with it.

The fisherman ran, and didn't stop until he reached the Burial Mounds.

Water ghouls seemed like the perfect first night hunt for their disciples, who were beginning to get restless despite their inexperience. Particularly those who had nighthunted independently or in previous sects, though they were still unlearning bad habits.

Lan Wangji led a group of three along the east bank of the river, supervising as they tried different methods of luring the creatures from the depths. His three were An Yulun — the self-taught disciple from Yiling who still nursed a crush on his husband, though he found her much improved now that she was not flirting with Wei Ying — a highly muscular young man from a destroyed temple sect, and a bone-thin rogue cultivator whose first teacher died before he finished forming his core.

Wei Ying was a ways upstream on the opposite bank, while the instructors were downstream with their own groups.

While they looked his mind drifted back to that morning. Wei Ying had surprised him by waking early, kissing him awake and diving down to take him in his mouth before he could fully process what had happened. But Wei Ying took his time, then, sucking him off like he had nothing more important to do with his day.

Lan Wangji found his hand creeping up to encircle his neck, tightening just slightly at the base. He held his breath for long moments, his focus narrowing to nothing more than the feeling of Wei Ying's mouth around him —

“Hey, Lan Zhan! Catch!” Wei Ying threw a projectile across the river at high speed. Lan Wangji raised his hand to catch it, but it never reached him.

A water ghoule leapt from the water and snatched the apple Wei Ying had thrown from mid-air not far from Lan Wangji's position.

“They are supposed to be learning, Wei Ying,” Lan Wangji reminded him, too fond for convincing exasperation.

“This is their first night hunt! A little learning by example won't hurt, and now they know where one is.” Wei Ying beamed at him, his hands clasped behind his back. “*And* they know that attaching a talisman to a projectile can make a good lure. Get moving kids, it won't stay there long!”

Wei Ying clapped two members of his group on the shoulders, making them stumble downriver toward the ghoule's position.

“I'm older than him,” the muscular disciple under Lan Wangji's charge grumbled. And quickly scrambled to draw his sword as the water ghoule leapt for him from the water. He caught it in the middle and with pure physical force sent it crashing back into the water.

As the disciples attempted to fight the water ghoule without falling in the river, a second one appeared and nearly took a disciple's leg off at the knee.

It was a clumsy fight, but the disciples won with only the slightest of subtle pushes from Wei Ying. Lan Wangji kept the second water ghoule from escaping with a quick sword flare into its

path, which Wei Ying definitely saw — and less importantly, the instructors — but the students were too busy slaying their first gui to notice.

*Something* rushed toward them with evil intent. He spun, summoning his guqin, summoning the strands of light he had used on the battlefield. They grew outward, grasping toward the disturbance, its source obscured by the glare of the afternoon sun.

“Lan Zhan, wait!” Wei Ying caught his elbow, having jumped across the river. “Those are people.”

Lan Wangji squinted, and the outlines of three people of different heights resolved, forcing themselves forward with desperate determination. It was only then that he saw the figures chasing them with a lumbering yet persistent gait. His guqin was not the correct weapon to deal with this, without frightening the people he intended to save worse.

He looked at Wei Ying, Wei Ying nodded back, and they leapt over the heads of the living people, crashing into the group of fierce corpses.

They made quick work of dismembering them, almost too quickly for the feeling of fighting alongside Wei Ying to wash over him. Almost.

Lan Wangji loved it.

Wei Ying poked an arm from one of the fierce corpses with the toe of his boot, frowning. So far as Lan Wangji could tell, they were only ordinary, mindless fierce corpses. Novel in itself after all the puppets they’d fought during the Sunshot Campaign. Wei Ying did not seem to concur.

“These were not made by Wen Ruohan. But they were made.” As opposed to rising from areas with concentrated resentment, which until recently had been far more common. “I couldn’t say who made them, though. The traces left by resentment feel nothing like the same person wielding spiritual energy. There’s a style, sure, but if you created, say, a construct of twigs and fallen leaves, using demonic cultivation, I wouldn’t be able to tell you made it unless I was there when you built it.”

“But I would never use demonic cultivation.” It was one thing to accept Wei Ying’s use, and something entirely different to use it *himself*.

“Right. Of course.” Wei Ying did not meet his eyes.

“Wei Ying?” he asked, but Wei Ying was already turning to the people they’d saved. A mother, a teenage girl, and a little boy. The boy slid down from his mother’s arms as she leaned heavily on her daughter.

“Let’s get you three to the town. You can at least have a meal and a rest. Do you have a place to go back to?” All three were overwhelmed, but only the teenage daughter managed to shake her head. “Ah, no, destroyed? Welcome to Yiling, then. I’m sure we can find you someplace to stay.”

The girl gasped. “Yiling? We really made it to Yiling?”

“Do you know the Yiling Laozu, mister?” The little boy asked.

“Oh, *do* I?” Wei Ying winked at him over the boy’s head, grinning. But while Wei Ying’s smile never failed to spark a sun in his chest, this one was strangely cold.

Lan Wangji had always known Wei Ying had his secrets. He had not expected him to share them so soon after marriage. But something about this deflection felt different.

Like it involved him.

“What number comes next, Hanguang-jun?” Wei Wuxian rubbed the reddened flesh of Lan Zhan’s ass, as he panted. Lan Zhan knelt over his lap on elbows and knees, his ass up for Wei Wuxian’s convenience. He shook with the effort of keeping from collapsing completely. Today, they explored the instruments and intensity with which Lan Zhan might enjoy being spanked, starting with his hand.

That was — pun intended — a hit.

While Lan Zhan tried to collect his words, Wei Wuxian fiddled with the jade plug buried in his ass, making it harder for him. His cock leaked, not for the first time, pre-cum dripping down Wei Wuxian’s bare thigh to collect on already damp sheets.

Lan Zhan had started putting out an extra sheet specifically for sex, which Wei Wuxian hadn’t thought of. He insisted on laying it out every morning after Wei Wuxian dragged himself out of bed, which — yeah, it had been convenient.

Lan Zhan was insatiable, but Wei Wuxian was up for the challenge. How could he be otherwise when his husband made such wonderful noises for him?

Squirming despite his efforts to keep still, Lan Zhan managed, “Ten.”

“Ten. Again. Am I not strong enough for you, Hanguang-jun? You need more than my hand?” Told to call out numbers between one and ten — as hard as Wei Wuxian could spank him without spiritual power behind it — to help him gauge force for future bedroom games, Lan Zhan had played along at first, and then started calling out *only* ten. Wei Wuxian swallowed heavily at the realization that this was Lan Zhan’s first-time being naughty, if only slightly.

Wei Wuxian hoped he might get the pleasure of seeing Lan Zhan truly, purposefully, misbehave. Just once, before the end.

He suspected he knew why his hand wasn’t enough — taught to bear pain stoically, he needed something more to make him break.

He glanced down at the two toys he had made for today, a rope flogger, and a leather paddle, nestled among the sheets. The flogger, he thought, Lan Zhan would prefer, because it would

be more difficult to prepare himself for each strike. There were any number of varieties he could make, to vary the pain of impact, and keep Lan Zhan from ever getting bored. But the paddle — that would jolt the plug in Lan Zhan's ass just right, send him tipping toward the edge.

"I saw the way you looked at my toys when I set them out. Hanguang-jun was practically drooling. But which should I give you?" Wei Ying asked, as though he hadn't already decided. He tapped the paddle once against Lan Zhan's ass as though marking his target, letting him know his choice. "I think you're bored with our little numbers game, aren't you? That's all right, leaving a trail of pre-cum I know what you need now. But I need you to do one thing for me — if you're about to come, don't stop. I want to see if you can, like this."

"Wei Ying," Lan Zhan whined, meaning *yes, please* and *get on with it*. No turtles were mentioned, so Wei Wuxian gave him three good whacks with it, with a medium force, and Lan Zhan whimpered with it. A few more times, and Lan Zhan tensed, panting. An anticipatory chill washed over him.

The loud breaths stopped, Lan Zhan holding his breath against the next strike of the paddle. Just after the impact, warmth spattered Wei Wuxian's bare inner thighs. He stroked Lan Zhan's lower back as he shook through it, savoring the languid satisfaction that settled in his core. Though, he thought, they could do better, come closer to slaking the hunger that always lurked, coiled within him, at every glimpse of Lan Zhan. A pale blue ribbon waving in the market was enough to make him *want*.

Lan Zhan's elbows collapsed, burying his face in the blankets.

"Did you think we were done? You told everyone I'd had you all night and that still isn't true. We have to make it the truth." That wouldn't be tonight — neither of them had enough energy — but Wei Wuxian was working up to it. "You have one more in you tonight, I think."

"Finally," Lan Zhan mumbled into the sheets, startling a laugh out of him. Lan Zhan was so good at surprising him. For all the world had convinced him he was boring and predictable, he was just as hungry as Wei Wuxian. He wished —

No. No wishes, not while he could enjoy what he did have.

Until now, he'd focused on Lan Zhan's ass, but now he shifted him to lie flat and slid out from beneath him, for better access to his untouched, sensitive skin of the back of his thighs. His head turned to the side so he could watch Wei Wuxian from the corner of his eye as he toyed with him.

He picked up the flogger, dragging the ends of the ropes up Lan Zhan's thigh, letting him know what came next. There were three ropes dangling from the handle, their ends frayed, and knots tied along their lengths to make the sensation sharper and more interesting. "Pick a number between ten and twenty."

"Twenty," Lan Zhan said, as he'd expected, which was why he'd chosen that upper limit. This was still their first foray into impact play, and while Lan Zhan healed fast, and Wei

Wuxian could always help the process along, he wanted Lan Zhan to wake in the morning and relish the sore and stinging reminders, not regret them.

The tails of the flogger left lurid trails across Lan Zhan's thighs, making him squirm involuntarily, where he'd stayed so still for his hand, and the paddle.

Lan Zhan was *ticklish*, he realized with delight, and filed that highly important information away for later.

He had to place his hand on Lan Zhan's back, holding him steady, to keep his strikes precise. He watched his eyes the entire time, waiting for the moment Lan Zhan slid under.

Lan Zhan nearly lost count halfway, "ten," he gasped out for the second time.

Wei Wuxian paused, pulling back. "Ten? Are you sure? Hanguang-jun wouldn't lie to me to get more than we agreed on, would he? Then I'd have to stop and leave you unsatisfied."

Lan Zhan hurried to correct himself. "No — eleven, don't stop please—"

"So greedy, Hanguang-jun. I'll forgive you this time." He snapped the flogger against Lan Zhan's left thigh, so the ends wrapped around the inner side. And his eyes unfocused, the muscles of his face relaxing. Wei Wuxian reached down to grasp his chin, peering into his eyes. It took a moment, but they met his. Heavy lidded but present.

"Twelve," Lan Zhan said, thickly yet clearly, urging him on.

"There we are," Wei Wuxian traced the line of Lan Zhan's jaw with his fingers as he pulled back. He finished the count, pausing between each strike for Lan Zhan to manage the correct number, watching him carefully the whole time.

"You did so well," he hummed, stroking along the raised welts, savoring the way Lan Zhan twitched under the sting of his gentle touch. "I've made such a pretty painting on your ass and thighs, they're beautiful. You're beautiful. You did so, so well for me."

He removed the plug, and shifted Lan Zhan back onto his lap, so he faced him, and his bruised ass and thighs did not rest on his calves. He directed Lan Zhan to bend forward so his head rested on his shoulder. "You're going to come on my fingers now," he told him.

"What? Wei Ying, I can't —"

You don't want to?" It was both a genuine question and a tease, asked as he circled Lan Zhan's rim, still loose from the plug, slowly with his fingers.

"I didn't say — I'm still —" His cock stood at half mast, Lan Zhan meant to say. If Lan Zhan thought that was enough to stop him, well, he was going to learn something about himself today.

"Oh, you think you *can't*. But your body is *mine*, Lan Zhan. If I say you'll come, you'll come." He caught Lan Zhan's earlobe in his teeth, and Lan Zhan abruptly tried to fuck

himself down on Wei Ying's fingers, though they weren't in the right position, desperate to follow his order.

"Please, please, ah —" Lan Zhan's words cut off as he filled him with three fingers all at once, replaced with incoherent sounds as Wei Wuxian targeted his prostate, varying the pressure to keep him from growing used to it. Though Lan Zhan still wasn't fully hard, he shuddered against him like it wouldn't take much more. And it didn't.

"See, you're already so close," Wei Wuxian whispered. "You always need more, always so responsive. I know what you need. Remember that, Lan Zhan, and come for me."

Lan Zhan bit down on his shoulder, but it did nothing to muffle his whine as he came, dry and shuddering, clenching around Wei Wuxian's fingers. Wei Wuxian clutched him close as his breathing evened out, needing the contact as much as Lan Zhan did.

"You didn't come once." Lan Zhan grumbled into his neck, a clear sign he'd begun to come back to himself.

Ah, his Lan Zhan, always so concerned with his husband's pleasure. He didn't yet seem to realize that what they did satisfied Wei Wuxian, whether his genitals were ever involved or not. Today, he wanted to be more alert in the aftermath. This was the first time Lan Zhan had gone so far under, and Wei Wuxian wanted to make sure they were both all right.

"This was what I wanted tonight." He scooped Lan Zhan up in his arms, and used his foot to clear a space on the bed he could set him down on gently on his stomach. "If you think it's unfair, you can suck me off in the morning."

Wei Wuxian was the one who needed cleaning up now, since Lan Zhan had come all over him from above. He grabbed the prepared cloth, dampened it, and wiped himself down more brusquely than he would have his husband.

"Or, hmm, you've been so very concerned about how many orgasms I'm having. Maybe I'll bring you to the edge and then not let you come. Maybe I'll have mercy after a few days, or maybe a few weeks. You won't know when until you're coming so over and over again, until you can't anymore. Tell me how that sounds in the morning."

"I can tell you yes now." Lan Zhan insisted, as Wei Wuxian helped him into a position to drink some tea. Once he'd finished sipping it, he reached out for Wei Ying's hand, though he needed it to rub a cream into the developing bruises.

"Tell me again in the morning anyway." He said and decided he could apply cream just as well with Lan Zhan resting on his chest.

Lan Zhan did suck him off in the morning. It was, incontestably, the nicest way he had ever woken. If Lan Zhan woke him like that every morning, Wei Wuxian would... wake up long enough for sleepy morning sex and then fall back to sleep. Unless there was an emergency, or

he was awake all night and wanted to do something nice for his husband before a nap, there was no reason to be up at daybreak. His husband's sleep schedule was utterly unreasonable.

Lan Zhan was lucky he loved him, Wei Wuxian thought, in a post-orgasmic sleepy haze. Only to remember why his love was not a blessing for Lan Zhan at all, and immediately find himself wide awake.

Sitting up, he caught Lan Zhan's hand, and pulled him in for a kiss, tasting himself on his tongue.

"There is something I have wanted to ask for," Lan Zhan said hesitantly when they parted.

"Ask away." He patted the side of the bed for Lan Zhan to sit. Lan Zhan should never be afraid to ask. If it was within Wei Wuxian's power, he would do everything he could to grant his every wish. Even if that wasn't the least he could do for him, he would want to.

Even if he couldn't grant it, Lan Zhan should be able to ask.

Lan Zhan hesitated a moment longer. "I have discovered that I enjoy... pressure, on my neck." He sucked in a breath, and when Wei Wuxian failed to reply, elaborated. "Holding my breath when I come intensifies the feeling, I have found. I believe with your help, it would do so more strongly."

"Oh." He managed, unnaturally high pitched.

"I want you to choke me, Wei Ying." Lan Zhan added, like he could possibly have misunderstood.

He hadn't. But, fuck. He wanted to encourage Lan Zhan asking for things. It happened so rarely when Wei Wuxian hadn't tricked him into it or drawn out a confession with his dominant wiles. He didn't like saying no to Lan Zhan.

But on this he had to. "I— no, I can't. That's a limit for me. Do you know how little force on the neck it takes to kill someone? Even a cultivator? I'll bruise your ass and thighs as much as you want. I'd step on your dick if you wanted it, but I'm not choking you."

"I do not think I want you to step on my —" his ears blushed, as though he hadn't said a hundred dirtier things in the heat of the moment. "I did not wish to make you uncomfortable."

He leaned forward to wrap Lan Zhan in his arms, nosing against his neck. "You didn't. We were always going to come across something like this, we'll probably come across more. But I want *you* to be able to talk to me about what you want. Better now than in the middle of a game, right?"

Lan Zhan craned his neck to kiss him on the nose. Wei Ying blinked back at him stupidly.

"Thank you, Wei Ying. Please do not worry, I understand." He extracted himself from his arms and rose to dress.



Watching him, Wei Wuxian could barely enjoy the sight of the purpling bruises across Lan Zhan's ass, the raised strips on his thighs. He sank back into the bed. It was too early for thoughts, and Lan Zhan's glorious nakedness very effectively stopped the few he'd managed to gather. The best thing he could do was go back to sleep.

Only he found himself unable to, replaying Lan Zhan's disappointment in his mind. There was no real reason to, they'd talked it over, resolved it, but — it wasn't that holding temporary control over Lan Zhan's breathing didn't sound appealing. It did. It really, really did. There was just too much of the one risk he wasn't willing to take — playing with the life of someone he loved.

He couldn't choke Lan Zhan, but Wei Wuxian wasn't an inventor of talismans for nothing. What if there was a way to give Lan Zhan the sensation he wanted without risking his life?

He wouldn't say anything, not yet, but if it worked — he could never shower Lan Zhan in enough gifts.

"I woke up this morning, came out to check on the livestock, and they was just like this." Farmer Bai threw up his hands in frustration. "First time it's happened since you came around. I thought we were done with this nonsense."

Wei Wuxian squinted at the pen before him, which held three pigs milling around and periodically charging the fence. Three very dead pigs, their hides already mottled with rot despite the owners' insistence they'd been fine only the day before.

It was the third report of undead animals in Yiling that week, though the first that couldn't be attributed to the creatures wandering in from outside. In another town, that would have resulted in panic. In Yiling, they simply called their Laozu.

"I won't let this continue forever," Wei Wuxian promised Farmer Bai. "I'm working on finding the cause, and on strengthening the ability of the wards around Yiling to sense when resentment comes in." He'd noticed when the fierce corpses entered his territory the other day, but this? Hadn't raised a single hair on his neck.

Wei Wuxian walked slowly back up the path to the Burial Mounds, twirling Chenqing as he reorganized his thoughts.

The transformation of creatures from living to undead was a side effect of to the presence of large quantities of resentment. It used to be relatively common in Yiling. Though since Wen Ruohan stole his first piece of Yin Iron at the cost of Wen Qing's parents' lives, a wider region had been affected.

Even Baoshan Sanren's mountain had not been immune — the geographical location of the mountains and valleys under her protection were technically on the northwestern reaches of Meishan Yu territory. An excellent location for feeding Wei Wuxian's eternal chili craving, but very close to Qishan. Waipo's protections had never been perfect. Couldn't be, or not even she would be able to leave or enter.

The nuisance of the undead monkeys on the path up the mountain had grown worse the longer he held it, and they'd even had a few fierce corpses while Wei Wuxian was away mastering demonic cultivation.

But it couldn't be the presence of their Yin Iron at fault — that was safely stowed away, and Lanling was too far away to affect Yiling by osmosis. The only location with a recent event close enough to cause that level of resentment — the destruction of the village in the still-decimated Yao Sect's territory by fierce corpses — had been cleansed. But someone had created those fierce corpses, likely the same demonic cultivator Song Lan had mentioned in his letter.

Someone intent on making it look like the Yiling Laozu, the only well-known living demonic cultivator remaining, was at fault. Someone in Jin Guangshan's employ, perhaps.

"Shifu!" Someone shouted, and he turned to see An Yulun running up to him from the direction of Yiling. Because she had family in town, she often went into town to pick up any messages that had been left there. "A letter arrived for Hanguang-jun! From Lanling."

Mianmian's reply. Finally. "Thank you, Yulun. Please join the others on the training field."

She bowed and ran off ahead.

Wei Wuxian found his husband in the cave with his grandmothers — both awake and in stasis — and Wen Qing. There was no good news here, either, from the looks on their faces. He handed the letter off to Lan Zhan unopened, letting his fingers linger against Lan Zhan's a moment longer than necessary. It was only his imagination that made it seem like Lan Zhan lingered too.

"Someone used the Yin Iron, didn't they?" he asked while Lan Zhan opened the letter and began to read.

"It's worse than that," Wen Qing said. "We think someone's been shielding their use of the Yin Iron."

Impossible, was his first thought. Impossible for anyone living except, well, *him*. And who would even think to try? So far as the world knew, the fourth piece had never been found, and the sword was not part of the legend.

So why was Waipo nodding along?

"I wasn't certain, at first. The fluctuations have been so small, it's far more subtle than I would expect from an amateur. But the thief is definitely using the Yin Iron. Today, there have been bigger surges, at intervals of about an incense stick." As Waipo spoke, another surge went through the array, A-Ma and the Yin Iron pieces vibrating so quickly they blurred into stretched out lines or gray and in A-Ma's case, the blue of the robes she had gone into stasis wearing. Just as abruptly, it stopped.

"You're sure today isn't the first time?" He asked.

“It’s been just like that, but far more subtle, and at random intervals,” Waipo said. “I’m sure.”

Wen Ruohan hadn’t possessed the expertise necessary to manipulate the Yin Iron without triggering an obvious response from the array. Wei Wuxian hadn’t known it was possible. Other than his A-Ma, the only previous wielder of any note, the only one who might have pulled it off, had been dead for five hundred years.

Definitively. Wei Wuxian had met Xue Chonghai’s ghost.

“So either more than one person is using the Yin Iron, or someone slipped up today,” Wei Wuxian concluded.

“I’d bet on the former, since there are three missing pieces,” Wen Qing agreed. “If Jin Guangshan did steal it, I’d bet he didn’t do the dirty work himself.”

Wei Wuxian nodded. “And whoever located it behind Lan Xichen’s seals and killed those disciples — they’re too skilled at demonic cultivation not to be able to demand or simply take a piece for themselves. But I’m getting ahead of myself. We don’t even have proof of Jin Guangshan’s involvement.”

“Perhaps evidence may arrive sooner than expected.” Lan Zhan looked up from the letter. “Mianmian is on her way here.”

Chapter End Notes

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 16

## Chapter Summary

Mianmian pays the Burial Mounds a visit, alongside an unexpected stowaway

## Chapter Notes

This fic now has an official chapter estimate! My outline's said 30 chapters for a while but I'm pretty sure of it now

**CW:** None that I can think of

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A merchant's cart loaded with goods from Qinghe plodded slowly through the streets of Yiling at the behest of its passenger, who took in the red-painted houses and carefree locals going about their business with interest. The interest was not returned — no visitor short of a sect leader was worth the effort of curiosity in the oppressive heat that heralded a thunderstorm.

“Are you sure you'll be all right here? Cultivators with a sect of their own aren't known to be welcome here,” the merchant asked when they reached the market square, though he had asked it several times over the course of their journey.

“I'm certain. I have an invitation.” Luo Qingyang handed over a piece of gold, for the merchant's discretion, and hopped down from her seat at his side. The merchant wished her well and struck up a conversation with a clerk from the town magistrate's office who had just approached.

Luo Qingyang turned to ask a young woman selling an assortment of children's toys, from intricately woven grass butterflies to wooden swords that looked like the Yiling Laozu's, how to get to the Burial Mounds. Only to see movement from the corner of her eye.

The blanket covering the goods in the back of the merchant's cart lifted. Luo Qingyang's sword was unsheathed and at the stowaway's throat before they could move further.

They put up a finger to the sword's point, pressing it back as if it were something distasteful. “If I intended harm, anytime along the road would have been a better opportunity.”

That voice was strangely familiar. *Annoyingly* familiar. She sheathed her sword, allowing the stowaway to extract themselves from among the bundles of iron and copper tools they'd been jostled between along the road.

Not particularly tall or muscular, despite the travel worn but fine gray robes of Qinghe Nie, without a saber to match her sword in sight.

“What on earth led you to follow me here, Nie Huaisang?” She demanded. He was just about the last person she would have expected to meet here, short of Jin Guangshan himself.

“Why the dealings of the hells, of course,” he said.

If Nie Huaisang's older brother hadn't been absolutely terrifying when it came to his safety, Luo Qingyang would have threatened him a little for a better answer. As it was, she decided to treat this situation like a six-year-old disciple had decided to latch onto her leg mid-errand: ignore it until she could pass Nie Huaisang off to someone better qualified to deal with him. In this case, someone better at verbal, sword-free intimidation.

*Like Wen Qing*, a voice in the back of her mind whispered. She squashed it back into place.

“Hold that thought.” She held up a finger and turned, finally, to address the toy vendor. “I'm here to see Wei Wuxian, he's expecting me.”

The vendor eyed her, assessing.

Luo Qingyang had shed her Jin robes for a set in mint green after she crossed the border of Lanling to prevent word of her side trip from getting back. Her sword, though, was more difficult to disguise, its hilt of fine make and decoration that could only come from a major sect.

Ostensibly, she was headed to Lotus Pier to drag Jin Zixuan back to Lanling, willing or unwilling. Which she would do, because it wasn't fair that he got to run off to woo his long-neglected betrothed while she was stuck dealing with his family and eavesdropping in shadowed corners. He could suck it up for a few weeks until the Crowd Hunt before running off again.

Really, she just wished she could go with him. Where rumors of why the Yiling Laozu's new husband was sending her letters wouldn't follow. Somehow, some people were still convinced theirs was a tragic love story, even going so far as to spread a tale that the Yiling Laozu had assigned her three impossible tasks and if she completed them, she would win back Hanguang-jun.

Some people did not know how to use their eyes. The servants didn't believe it of course, those who had served as camp followers spreading word of how kind the Yiling Laozu was, and how adorably smitten he and Hanguang-jun were. It gave her a reason to talk to them, at least, and servants really were an excellent source of information.

Ultimately, the vendor nodded, her use of Wei Wuxian's name and lack of negative adjectives to describe him giving her a pass. “You can keep heading down the street until you reach the

edge of town. A path there leads right up to the Burial Mounds. If he isn't there one of the Wen siblings can tell you where he is."

Mechanically, she thanked the vendor and started down the street, Nie Huaisang trailing her with no attempt at subtlety.

The Wen siblings. Perfect, exactly who she wanted to talk to. Wen Ning was sweet and had never done anything wrong in his life. But unless Wen Qing intended to grovel, Luo Qingyang didn't want to see her.

Suffice it to say she was not dealing with the rejection well.

It would be one thing if Wen Qing had rejected her because she wasn't interested. Instead, she had made Luo Qingyang feel like a dire fate to run from, not a lover worth running toward. She'd been left behind with only a broken promise, and she did not expect that to change.

Nie Huaisang spoke up when they were out of earshot of the village, on a narrow path leading inexorably upward. "You call him by name. Interesting."

"Everyone Wei Wuxian can convince to drop the formality calls him by name." Which wasn't a terribly long list outside of Baoshan Sanren's mountain, but Luo Qingyang had always delighted in defying society's expectations.

Nie Huaisang didn't speak again, busy huffing and puffing as he tried to keep up with her, just noisy enough to disturb his peace and quiet.

Past an ancient tree with thick roots rising from the soil, the trees opened up on a clearing backed by a sheer rock face. Her jaw dropped.

Knowing Wei Wuxian's reluctance to become a sect leader, she'd expected a few buildings, a handful of people. What she saw was halfway to a thriving palace. The buildings on the edge of the clearing were still under construction, with Wen Ning and some townspeople actively piecing them together. Between the beams, she could see a courtyard surrounded by red-painted buildings with dark roofs. A group of disciples in Yiling Wei's black and red crouched together in groups in the courtyard, playing some kind of game that didn't look like any traditional teaching she'd ever seen.

Wen Ning caught sight of her and pointed her to a second courtyard. She waved her thanks, and headed over with Nie Huaisang following, assuming he was directing her to Wei Wuxian. He wasn't.

From the shade of a porch, Wen Qing watched over a group of Luo Qingyang's former fellow disciples as they practiced their stitches. These were the ones she'd saved when Jin Guangshan decided they were no longer useful. Lan Wangji had said the ones who survived were doing well in his letters, but she was glad to see as much for herself.

She didn't know how to react to seeing her for the first time in months. She'd thought she would be angrier. Mostly, she was numb.

Luo Qingyang stood there awkwardly, watching, until Nie Huaisang cleared his throat and loudly announced his presence.

Wen Qing looked up, her gaze immediately locking onto her. “Mian — Luo Qingyang.”

So. It was like that, was it? Pretending they had never been anything more than acquaintances. “I see. Wen Qing.”

Wen Qing drooped at the use of her name, rather than the affectionate Qing-jie. Luo Qingyang didn’t know what she’d expected.

“It’s not what you think, I —” Wen Qing broke off, her eyes narrowing as she noticed Nie Huaisang. “Who is this?”

Nie Huaisang looked like the awkwardness between them was a platter full of his favorite dessert. Always an incorrigible gossip, that one. No one’s dalliances at the Gusu lectures had stayed a secret for long, thanks to him.

“This is Nie Huaisang. He followed me here.” Luo Qingyang introduced him with a flick of her hand.

“Followed you.” There was a trio of needles between Wen Qing’s fingers where there hadn’t been before.

Despite herself, Luo Qingyang’s breath caught in her throat, her chest aching. She should be angry, that Wen Qing flip flopped between acting like she didn’t care, and heartbroken, and protective. Maybe she was. But the heart was a traitorous beast and hers was confused, hurting, hopeful.

“Whoa, I’m unarmed. No need for violence.” Nie Huaisang held out his hands, frantic and placating. “I know the Yiling Laozu didn’t steal the Yin Iron.”

Wen Qing did not so much as twitch. “You’ve never met him. You weren’t even at the Sunshine Campaign.”

“No. I was busy managing all the birds.” He spoke with his hands, miming a bird soaring in to land on his wrist.

“The birds. *You’re* the person who was coordinating the information network with Meng Yao?” Wen Qing asked, disbelieving.

“So you probably shouldn’t use those on me, right? Dage and Meng Yao would be so very upset if anything happened to me.” Nie Huaisang smiled vapidly and, fanning himself harder against the heat, as he took a sudden intense interest in the scaffolding of a building still under construction.

Wen Qing’s needles vanished back into her sleeve, replaced by a talisman. It became a rabbit made of light and bounded off through the air when she whispered to it. “Wei Wuxian messed around with the traditional butterfly for Hanguang-jun. They should be here shortly,” she said to them.

Refusing to meet her eyes, Wen Qing stared at Nie Huaisang, who continued staring at the wall like he couldn't feel the twin daggers of her gaze on the back of his neck. And Luo Qingyang, whose feelings hadn't dwindled in the time apart no matter how hard she tried, drank her in. She looked better than when Luo Qingyang had last seen her, tanned from the summer sun and more present, less like she was running on inedia and muscle memory. More like the woman Luo Qingyang had swiftly fallen in love with on a secluded mountain, Wen Qing had always worn her beauty like an accessory for the strength of her mind. That hadn't changed.

She wore new robes, too, to match the status of Yiling Wei's first disciple, the outer robe of black and silver that hung open like her sect leader's brought out her cheekbones, the bright crimson of the second layer made her lips seem a more vibrant red.

They had tasted of alcohol used for antiseptic when she kissed them; they wouldn't now.

For one brief, shining moment, she had seen the rest of her life laid out before her, and it had been everything she dreamed of and more. And then Wen Qing had made her feel like a child who couldn't be trusted to know her own mind, who wouldn't understand why there might be things Wen Qing could not share, when their relationship was new and only beginning to blossom.

Luo Qingyang was, frankly, surprised Wen Qing didn't leave to fetch Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji herself. Her surprise vanished she saw them. Wei Wuxian was slightly disheveled, but so was Lan Wangji, the belt of his robes hastily tied and his collar askew. A flush was high in his cheeks.

Well. At least someone was having a good time lately.

"Mianmian!" Wei Wuxian's eyes crinkled at the corners with genuine delight, despite the obvious interruption. "You're here! Lan Zhan's been looking forward to this for ages."

"It is good to see you," Lan Wangji conceded. He still seemed flustered, so she could only assume marriage was working out very well for him.

"Why don't we talk over dinner? We can bring it to one of the empty buildings across from our rooms, so the disciples can't eavesdrop. You can freshen up while I decide what to do with this trespasser of a sect heir." Wei Wuxian eyed Nie Huaisang strangely, and Nie Huaisang squinted back. Luo Qingyang had the strangest feeling they'd gotten into a dick measuring contest over the size of their brains.

Choosing her company over Nie Huaisang's, Lan Wangji showed her to a guestroom. They passed a pair of caves on the way, the larger of which was in the process of being turned into an elaborate banquet hall. Just outside, an elderly man in his sixties who just so happened to be a fierce corpse was carving an elaborate design into a pair of thrones.

She couldn't tell what the design was yet, but the fact that there were two thrones was telling. One for Lan Wangji, giving him unprecedented power equal to his husband. Though he still wore robes in Lan colors, he was as much a part of Yiling Wei as the Yiling Laozu himself.



“Have you decided on your emblem yet?” She asked.

“Wen Ning and the townspeople decided for us.” He said. “Wei Ying is impatient to learn what they chose.”

Ooh, *Lan Wangji* openly using his husband's birth name. He spoke the name like it was sacred, the most precious thing he could speak. How adorable. “You seem to be settling in well. Married life agrees with you.”

“It does.” Lan Wangji almost smiled, but it faded just as quickly.

“Something's on your mind.”

He hesitated. His free arm, previously loose at his side, wrapped around his back to grip his sword arm. “I fall more in love with Wei Ying each day. What if he never feels the same?”

Mianmian tried to treat that like a reasonable question. She really did.

She snorted. “You think I'm that imperceptive? You barely tied your belt back in place.”

“I am aware that some people do not have to be in love to want to have sex, Mianmian.”

She gasped dramatically. “No! Who told you?”

“I am not a child.” Lan Wangji said, long suffering. Like he hadn't been horrified by the mere implication of an innuendo only months earlier.

“You can't see how he looks at you. Trust me.”

“Then why hasn't he said anything?” Lan Wangji actually sighed aloud. This must really be eating at him.

“Have you confessed?” She asked.

“He said we did not feel the same.” Lan Wangji pulled open the door to her guest room more forcefully than necessary. It was new and barely furnished, but a bed, a washstand, and a chamber pot were all she really needed.

“Not the same thing. This *was* supposed to be an arranged marriage. Maybe he thinks *you're* not in love with *him*. “ She didn't think pointing that out would make him more likely to confess, but hopefully it would get him thinking.

His brow furrowed. “I am confused.”

Ah, he was hopeless. But then again, so was she. “Meanwhile, I can see how Wen Qing feels about me. It's her actions that don't make sense.”

Lan Wangji didn't pry. She liked that about him. After growing up in a sect full of nosy busybodies — having had the misfortune to be born to a family of innkeepers in Lanling

rather than Qinghe, where she might have had the choice of joining a nice, quiet local sect — it was refreshing.

She was glad that stupid murder turtle gave them the chance to become friends.

“Perhaps we are the only people that make sense in the world,” he said, contemplative.

She laughed, and shooed him out the door.

By the time Luo Qingyang arrived at dinner, the first drops of rain had begun to fall.

Nie Huaisang was sitting in the room, apparently having made himself comfortable, as he fanned himself against the lingering heat. He reached for the cover over one of several dishes set on a low round table, only for Wen Qing to smack his fingers away with the back ends of her chopsticks.

“I’ve been hiding in a cart for *days*, have mercy,” Nie Huaisang whined. “All I’ve had to eat was dry fruit and nuts.”

“Sounds to me like comeuppance for stowing away.” Luo Qingyang took the second to last of the six places beside Wen Ning, leaving a space beside Wei Wuxian for Lan Wangji.

Wen Qing was, unfortunately, across from her, so she got a perfect view of her brief smile as Nie Huaisang hid behind his fan.

Luo Qingyang pointedly ignored her, turning to Wei Wuxian. He was working with cords, as was his habit, a chain of small, intricate silver and red knots dangling from his hands as he added another.

“What are you working on?” She asked.

He startled, shoving his work down into his lap before seeming to realize that was suspicious. With a sheepish grin, he held it up for her to see. “Oh, it’s a gift for Lan Zhan. A, um, a necklace.”

It was a strangely shaped necklace, the knots building in size to about two finger lengths wide at the largest, tapering off before she would have expected. Almost like it was intended to sit snug around a throat rather than lie over the collarbones.

“Another protective token?”

“Not exactly, but sort of. Yes.” He didn’t elaborate, but flushed, rubbing the soft cord between his fingers.

Luo Qingyang did not press further, preferring awkward silence to learning what could be so embarrassing about a gift for one’s husband.

Wen Ning, bless his heart, filled the void by humming off-key until Lan Wangji arrived, shortly after. At the sight of him, Wei Wuxian shoved his work up his sleeve, his blinding grin distracting his husband from noticing anything amiss.

“Now that everyone’s here, I suppose you can eat,” Wei Wuxian told Nie Huaisang, as he lifted the cover from the central dish with a flourish.

Nie Huaisang hesitated only a moment before going for some steamed fish in a fragrant red sauce. There was a whole assortment of dishes and if the smell indicated anything, Wei Wuxian had hired the best cooks in the region, so Luo Qingyang took a little of everything, and poured herself a cup of wine from one of the six jars on the table.

Lan Wangji piled meat onto his husband’s rice. Beaming, Wei Wuxian brushed Lan Wangji’s hair off his shoulder, to kiss the bare skin of his neck, and whispered something in his ear that made him flush and shift in place. And as if he’d done nothing, Wei Wuxian reached for a bowl of vegetable noodles, and added a heaping helping to Lan Wangji’s bowl.

Something told Luo Qingyang they wouldn’t be moving past the smitten newlywed stage anytime soon.

“So, Mianmian. Tell us about all the daring espionage you’ve been up to,” Wei Wuxian said when she was all of three bites into her meal.

Luo Qingyang paused with her mouth full and set down her bowl. No one ever asked questions after she’d taken a *small* bite. She gestured with her chopsticks as she chewed and swallowed.

“Before Zixuan left for Lotus Pier, he helped get past some of the wards only his family is supposed to have access to, but we didn’t find much. I’ve never known his family to be so attentive to secrecy, but this time, they’re determined. Since he left, I’ve been talking to the servants.” The gentry never remembered the servants unless they wanted something. “They told me Jin Guangshan has been ordering meals in the middle of the night, for himself and several guests, and those who deliver them come back exhausted or never come back at all.”

Wen Qing frowned. “Like their qi is being sucked out?”

“I tried to eavesdrop on his meetings myself.” It had been the most disorienting thing she’d ever experienced. Including being thrown into a wall by an evil turtle.

A haughty looking young man walked down the corridor toward her, though there had been no one there before. It looked like a different corridor altogether where he was, compared to her position. “What are you doing here?” He asked.

Luo Qingyang thought fast. “A letter from Zongzhu’s distant cousin, the one he set up in former Nightless City, arrived as I was going off watch duty. I was going to drop it off in Zongzhu’s office, but I can’t seem to find it? I swear I’ve been there a thousand times.”

She giggled. This seemed like the sort of cultivator who would believe only frivolous nobodies giggled.

Sure enough, his suspicion faded. "I'll take it for you."

"Are you new? I don't think I should leave it with someone who hasn't been here very long. It'll be on both of us if it gets lost." She twirled a loose strand of hair hanging by her ear around her finger.

"I joined the sect recently, yes. Jin-zongzhu recognized my management talents could aid in his new position" The man bragged. "I just came from his office on an errand. There's a very important meeting in process. I'll make sure he sees to it in the morning."

"Oh! Of course, Zongzhu could use more staff, to meet the demands of the Chief Cultivator's position. I'm sure you're very talented." It was a backhanded enough compliment that he squinted at her, trying to figure out if she was genuine, or calling him a servant. Not used to Koi Tower's ways yet, then. She handed the letter over, and patted his hand as he took it, smiling blankly.

He relaxed. Definitely not used to Koi Tower then. He didn't even notice her quick check of his spiritual energy. It was tainted with resentment. But not like it would be if he'd touched the Yin Iron regularly.

As he began to walk back down the corridor, its shape began to waver, like the air around a fire or stone buildings during a heat wave.

"Wait!" She called out.

He turned back, and the corridor settled.

"I didn't catch your name."

"It is Su Minshan, Guniang." He didn't bother to ask hers.

She started waving to him cheerily whenever their paths crossed. It made the disciples she'd known for years wonder what she was up to, but they always assumed she was up to something. Ever since she dunked Jin Zixun in a pond when she was ten years old and newly arrived at Koi Tower, securing her position as the sect heir's best friend.

The servant who'd been summoned that night did not return. Officially, he'd been sent packing — a common enough occurrence, given the mercurial moods of Jin Guangshan and his nephew. But his family was local, and when Luo Qingyang went to check in with his family, they hadn't heard anything since he last brought home his wages.

A week later, the next servant summoned to a midnight meeting did return, only to collapse on the kitchen doorstep. She was a pretty, lively young woman who was exactly Jin Guangshan's type, though she wasn't one of his current mistresses. That was likely why she survived, and the man proceeding her went missing. Luo Qingyang visited her bedside, hoping for answers, and found her woozy, but awake. Her skin had an unhealthy gray

undertone, and there were dark bags beneath his eyes. “Do you remember anything about that night?”

“I remember arriving at Zongzhu’s office. There were... two? Maybe three men there with Zongzhu, but I couldn’t tell you who. I looked in one of the guests’ eyes and then — nothing.” If possible, the servant paled further.

“May I see your wrist?” Luo Qingyang asked. “Your qi’s severely depleted. I could speed your recovery, but someone might notice.”

The servant girl shook her head, and nearly fainted from the effort. “It doesn’t matter. I’m quitting. I thought the chance of a few expensive trinkets if I caught Zongzhu’s attention for a month could help my family, but it’s not worth this.”

“Well, it’s terribly tragic that you fell and hit your head.” Luo Qingyang donated enough spiritual energy to put the servant girl back on her feet, and her friends smuggled her out of the tower by morning.

Luo Qingyang sighed and downed her wine in a single gulp. “I still haven’t managed to eavesdrop on one of those meetings. It’s like the layout of the tower changes when they’re happening.”

Before anyone could ask her anything else, she resumed her meal. Nie Huaisang wasn’t the only one hungry from his travels, but while he patted his belly, sated, she had barely started.

“It sounds like someone’s set up powerful misdirection wards.” Wei Wuxian mused. “Xue Chonghai used something like that to keep everyone else away from the Burial Mounds while he fought Wen Mao. I didn’t think the technique had been passed down.”

“Did your grandmothers teach you how to break them?” Wen Ning asked.

“They’re not how I learned that but — we can ask Waipo.” Wei Wuxian changed tracts mid-sentence. Something he’d learned while cleansing the Burial Mounds? She wondered. He always clammed up about the Burial Mounds as they had been.

“Who’s Waipo?” Nie Huisang asked.

No one answered. Wen Ning put his head on his hand, realizing he shouldn’t have revealed the Yiling Laozu had living grandmothers to an outsider, though Wei Wuxian didn’t seem to care.

Wen Qing leaned across the table, addressing her. “You shouldn’t try to break them on your own.”

Luo Qingyang didn’t know what to be more offended about — Wen Qing’s assumption that she would be stupid enough to try, or that she thought she had the right to worry anymore.

“Wen Qing, I’m not an expert, but doesn’t the qi loss sound like a Jiangshi?” Nie Huaisang mused. “I heard the Lan disciples who died standing guard over the Yin Iron were found drained of their qi.”

“They were?” Wei Wuxian sat forward with interest. “I hadn’t heard that.”

Nie Huaisang shrugged. “Lan-zongzhu hasn’t publicized it.”

“It’s not likely.” Wen Qing said. “There are also several demonic cultivation techniques that drain qi — Wen Ruohan used them on occasion, trying to counter the Yin Iron’s effect on his core. Jiangshi aren’t exactly inconspicuous.”

No, a hopping corpse with greenish, possibly rotting, flesh wouldn’t be.

“I bet a demonic cultivator of sufficient power could figure out how to resurrect themselves as one, and alter their appearance.” Wei Wuxian mused.

“Wei-gongzi!” Wen Ning protested. “You’re going to give me nightmares.”

“Sorry,” Wei Wuxian said sheepishly. “Your sister’s right - a regular demonic cultivator is much more likely. My Shishu and his partner have been tracking one who’s been stirring up trouble and seems to be good at disappearing. What are the odds Jin Guangshan’s is the same one?”

“I think I’ll start carrying around some peach wood and a mirror, just to be safe,” Luo Qingyang said.

Nie Huaisang shivered. “Me too. And an entire sheaf of fire talismans.”

“We’ll be in Koi Tower before long, ourselves. Maybe you should hold off on any more investigating until then.” Lan Wangji suggested.

Wei Wuxian sighed. “I’m glad to get the confirmation that Jin Guangshan’s working with someone, but it’s too dangerous alone. Even for me, it would be — I won’t have an army of ghosts behind me, but they have three pieces of Yin Iron. And apparently, they know how to use it.”

She nodded. “Don’t worry, I’ll hide behind Zixuan in the meantime.”

Lan Wangji quirked an eyebrow, doubtful.

“I’m not *actually* his bodyguard, you know. We protect each other.” That was how they’d survived Koi Tower for so many years, after all. That, and Zixuan’s terrifying mother. No one dared disobey her unless Jin Guangshan gave directly opposing orders — and he never did, because spent perhaps an incense stick a day thinking about his son, and no time at all on his wife.

“Mianmian —” Wen Qing started to say, forgetting now that she’d put them on formal terms herself.

“Let’s drink!” Wei Wuxian grabbed two wine jars and set one in front of Wen Qing, and the other before Luo Qingyang. Not having finished her first jar, she shifted it over to Wen Ning. “No sense in wasting all this. Wen Qing and Wen Ning’s Si-Shushu just moved his distillery to Yiling, and his wines are already ten times better.”

“To finding Jin Guangshan’s accomplice, and destroying the Yin Iron,” Wei Wuxian toasted.

Save for Lan Wangji, they downed their cups. And thunder clapped overhead, followed a few seconds later by the flash of lightning that set the room alight.

“I’m going to pretend that was a good sign.” Wei Wuxian said.

Nie Huaisang cleared his throat and pointed out the last untouched wine jar. “You know, guests are expected to drink at Koi Tower. The Jin aren’t known for respecting the rules of natal sects, when someone’s married out.”

“Well, Lan Zhan still doesn’t drink, so they can fight me if they dare,” Wei Wuxian bumped his shoulder against his husband’s.

“I have never tried.” Lan Wangji said softly. “I would like to know why you enjoy it.”

“If you really want to, please allow this husband to pour your first drink.” Visibly trying not to grin and pressure him, Wei Wuxian held his jar at the ready.

Lan Wangji nodded. Wei Wuxian beamed, filling the cup just below the rim. But almost as soon as Lan Wangji swallowed his wine, he fell face first onto the table.

“We’ve poisoned him.” Wen Ning said, aghast.

“Lan Zhan?” Wei Wuxian hovered over his husband’s immobile form.

They needn’t have worried — about his health, at least. Lan Wangji sat up, suddenly, and climbed to his feet.

“Lan Zhan?!!” Wei Wuxian shrieked, as Lan Wangji started to wobble his way toward the door, his path stopped by Wei Wuxian grabbing hold of his robes.

“No, A-Zhan. You can’t go out there, it’s raining.” Wei Wuxian stuck out his lower lip and looked up at Lan Wangji from beneath his lashes. “Will you stay here if I hold your hand?”

Lan Wangji nodded slowly, accepting Wei Wuxian’s hand. Rather than retake his own seat, he plopped down sideways on Wei Wuxian’s lap, and began playing with his husband’s fingers.

“Ah, Lan Zhan is so cute. Cute and naughty, like a bunny.” With his free hand, Wei Wuxian bopped Lan Wangji on the nose. The consequence of this was that Lan Wangji captured it, and he no longer had a free hand. Wei Wuxian just stared at his silly, drunken husband, adoring.

“I miss the bunnies.” Lan Wangji pouted at his husband.

“Would you like to bring some here? We could start our own colony.”

Lan Wangji nodded.

No longer able to hold herself back, Luo Qingyang burst out laughing. The others joined in, Wei Wuxian included. She understood now, how Wei Wuxian might call the Second Jade of Lan cute. The mood lightened, the tension between Luo Qingyang and Wen Qing taking a back seat, as they all joined in on teasing Wei Wuxian.

Oh, if the sect leaders who feared the Yiling Laozu could see him now. Love drunk — though he appropriated the last jar of wine for himself, when he managed to extricate a hand from his husband’s death grip, he didn’t seem to get any drunker — and doting on his husband.

Over time, Lan Wangji curled in closer to his chest, tucking his head between Wei Wuxian’s shoulder and chin, blinking slower and slower.

“Ah, I think it’s time for me to tuck this one into bed.” Wei Wuxian declared. “Feel free to stay up as long as you want.”

As Wei Wuxian carried him away in his arms, one of Lan Wangji’s eyes opened, staring back at them, smug. Nie Huaisang clapped a hand over his mouth trying not to laugh until they were out of earshot.

It wasn’t much longer before Nie Huaisang yawned and stretched as well. “Well, I think it’s time for this Huaisang to retire. Traveling in the back of a merchant’s cart is *terrible* for your back, if you were wondering.”

Wen Ning won a silent exchange with his sister. “I’ll show you to a room.”

They left Luo Qingyang alone with Wen Qing.

She wasn’t ready. But if she didn’t speak first, Wen Qing might run away again, and at the very least, Luo Qingyang wanted closure. She stood, moving to stand by the window, staring out at the rain. “I was surprised to find you here. I thought you’d have fled for the mountain the moment you heard I was coming.”

She meant her words to come out lighthearted and casual, and she succeeded perhaps too well. Because Wen Qing said, “Wei Wuxian wouldn’t open the portal for me.”

Her heart plummeted. “Oh.”

“No, not — not really. I wouldn’t do that to you. I owe you an explanation.” Wen Qing was closer now, at her shoulder

With a sigh, she turned and found earnest belief in Wen Qing’s eyes. There was a fundamental difference between them, that Wen Qing believed in actions taken out of debt or duty, rather than out of choice or desire. Luo Qingyang had tried to ignore it, before. “It’s not that you owe me. It’s that you made me a promise, and didn’t keep it.”

“You *deserve* an explanation,” Wen Qing amended.



That was better. “I’m listening.”

Wen Qing hesitated, still. When she spoke it was measured, so Luo Qingyang knew her answer was the truth as she believed it. “It has to do with the Yin Iron — not it’s theft, something else. And it’s not — it’s a way to save lives, the only way. But the methods are terrible, and they’re not my secret to share. Only three of us know the truth.”

“It has something to do with Lan Wangji, doesn’t it?” It was Wei Wuxian’s secret, of course. Who else could it be — Wen Ning? And the only people who knew the truth of how Wei Wuxian mastered Demonic Cultivation were Wen Qing and Baoshan Sanren.

She remembered a miracle in a medical tent, a woman taken over by a demonic infection waking in full health where Lan Wangji’s power melded with Wei Wuxian’s. Luo Qingyang doubted that could have worked with just any cultivator, or Wen Qing would have attempted it with him herself.

“I can’t tell you that,” Wen Qing did not meet her eyes.

“Thank you for your honesty.” That was all she’d asked for.

“If you’re still interested once this is all over —”

Unable to believe her ears, Luo Qingyang scoffed. “No. I deserve better than that.”

“I understand.” Wen Qing put her hand on the door, starting to push, without grabbing an umbrella.

“Do you?” She asked, with a hysteric edge and Wen Qing paused, rain spattering her slippers. “I won’t wait around for you to give me a reason to reject you. That doesn’t mean I’m not interested. I’d ask who taught you that I have to know all of your secrets to know your character, but I know the answer. Qing-jie, any lesson your uncle taught you is almost certainly one that wasn’t worth learning.”

“That is easier said than done.” Wen Qing said, but she couldn’t hide her hope.

Against her will and all good sense, Luo Qingyang’s heart began to pound. “I trust that you’re not keeping this secret because you want to hurt anyone, but because it would do more harm than good to tell me.”

Wen Qing nodded, earnest.

“Court me now, Qing-jie.” Luo Qingyang added for clarity. Wen Qing didn’t have to share everything with her, but an effort to communicate would be nice. “*That’s* what I’m offering.”

Wen Qing tilted her head, squinting up at her. “Is that a challenge?”

“It could, if you want it to be.”

“Hold out your hand.” Wen Qing slid a pin from her own hair and placed it in her open palm. The design was simple, curving shapes cut into wood. But then she wrapped her hand around Luo Qingyang’s, guiding her to find a catch that, when depressed, caused a small blade to slide out from the wide end. The blade slid smoothly back into its hiding place when the spot was pressed again, causing the catch to pop out. “You may consider this a first courting gift, if you would like.”

Luo Qingyang flicked the blade open and closed several more times, admiring. “I would like that very much.”

A tool like this would be so useful in Koi Tower.

She grabbed for Wen Qing’s hand as she pulled away and brought the back of it up to her lips. Wen Qing’s lips parted, a soft blush staining her cheeks.

She hadn’t said the courting would only go one way.

“Lan Zhan! Come back inside!” She heard Wei Wuxian shout.

The rain outside had eased up to a sprinkle, the worst of the storm past. And Lan Wangji spun in uneven circles beneath it, staring up at the sky.

## Chapter End Notes

My beta asked me for a Qingmian chapter months, and I hadn't planned any (Or the second half of the fic in detail tbh) but I think she was right!

Any theories on the identity of the thief/jgs' co-conspirator yet?

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 17

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji wonders what Wei Wuxian is hiding, and Wei Wuxian revisits an old trauma that might be more relevant to current events than he knows.

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** body horror monster, and for the smut scene: magic breathplay, cockwarming, rimming (goes from: "What do you need?" to "Lan Wangji would have liked to stay")

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

A portal opened at the tree with deep roots, and Wei Ying stepped through with Wen Qing at his side. Though he felt he should, somehow, be able to sense Wei Ying at all times, Lan Wangji had not realized he'd left the Burial Mounds until that moment.

When he left that morning, Wei Ying had rolled over onto his side of the bed and nuzzled his face into the sheets, sound asleep. Lan Wangji spent the morning aiding a student, a former rogue cultivator who was struggling with calligraphy, and mediating an argument between the cooks and the construction workers. Who were, apparently, too loud.

Perhaps he had gone to update Baoshan Sanren on Mianmian's information, after she departed for Lotus Pier? And of course, Wen Qing had her family to visit. Lan Wangji wished he would have told him. It had been a week since he last saw A-Yuan and A-Xi, he would have liked to accompany them.

Catching sight of him, Wei Ying broke off from his discussion with Wen Qing, and rather than invite him in, ran over to join him. Almost as if he didn't want Lan Wangji to know what they'd been talking about.

Wei Ying *wasn't* obligated to share private matters, Lan Wangji reminded himself. He himself had a secret, if only the truth of his feelings for Wei Ying. That did not stop him from feeling an irrational sting of rejection.

He'd felt strangely off-kilter in their relationship lately. It wasn't Wei Ying setting a limit — Lan Wangji had known his desires would likely not align perfectly with Wei Ying's — or some irrational jealousy over husband's friendship with a woman. It probably wasn't even that Wei Ying had not let him climax for eleven days.

The problem was him. That his desire for more than Wei Ying could give built with each passing day. For not just sex, or the material tokens that seemed to accumulate in his jewelry box no matter how little time Wei Ying had to spare, but true companionship.

The only thing he truly wanted for was Wei Ying's heart, and for that, he could not ask.

He was kissed, long and slow, when Wei Ying reached him. He clung on, dizzy and wanting from only lips and tongue. The want in him only seemed to grow the more Wei Ying gave him. If he wasn't careful, it wouldn't be long until he gave his secret away.

"A monster's gotten in through the eastern barrier. It's far from town now, but this thing feels *huge*." Wei Ying announced while Lan Wangji still chased his lips. "I don't think the disciples are up for it. What do you say, husband? Shall we go vanquish it together?"

He nodded, and bathed in the rays of Wei Ying's grin as he led the way.

Xiongzhong would be happy to hear that he had gone night hunting without the disciples. Lan Wangji, too, would have expected himself to miss it more. Perhaps it was the rush of being newly wed, but he wanted to be wherever Wei Ying was. Always.

Lan Wangji wanted to help people far more than he relished the thrill of victory. After the war, helping people in ways that did not require bloodshed was more appealing than ever.

Night hunting with Wei Ying was a dream come true, however.

"It's nice to get away from all of that isn't it?" Wei Ying glanced back over his shoulder. "Get some peace and quiet for once - which I'm interrupting. Sorry."

"I like your voice." He could happily listen to Wei Ying talk for hours.

"Ah." Wei Ying flushed. It was always little honest statements that seemed to fluster him, and it surprised Lan Wangji every time. "I bet my rambling and droning on is meditative for you. That, or you want me to drag you into the bushes to fuck you again."

Would Wei Ying finally let him come today? The uncertainty kept his desire simmering high enough it threatened to overflow.

But he wouldn't disobey. Not on purpose. Unless Wei Ying *made* him — there was a thought.

"After we dispatch the monster, perhaps," He swept in front of Wei Ying, sending the tails of his robes swirling around his ankles, and did not look back until peals of Wei Ying's laughter echoed against the trees.

The monster was the size of a large pavilion, pieced together from corpses of humans and animals, some rotting, others fresh, bound together with writhing vines. Its path was marked by a trail of devastation, marked by emptiness and dark blood, foliage devoured down to the last blade of grass. Even rock had been eaten away, with pebbled areas beginning to form on

the beast's flesh. It tottered on five unsteady appendages that could vaguely be termed legs, with more strangely shaped protrusions along its flanks

Lan Wangji had never seen anything like it, but he did not let lack of knowledge slow his response. Keeping his distance, he waved his hands to make Wangji appear before him and sent a bolt of spiritual energy toward the beast's foremost head, that of an elderly human, testing. The bolt lopped off the head, sending it flying to land at his feet.

The beast did not seem to notice.

Worse, tendrils of goo seeped out of the severed neck, and the head began to drag itself toward him, mouth straining for his ankles. Lan Wangji played a quick sequence of chords, sending a second burst of energy to immolate it.

Clearly, chopping the beast into pieces was the wrong tactic. He turned to Wei Ying, hoping to coordinate an attack.

Wei Ying stood stock still and staring, Chenqing held looses in his hands. He looked terrified, where Lan Wangji had always thought him near fearless, save of losing those he loved. Wei Ying faced down ancient corrupted divine beasts, hordes of puppets whose blood spread like disease, the Burial Mounds themselves without flinching. A monster, even one as grotesque as this, should have been nothing to him.

He was shaking. And the beast crept onward.

There was no time to determine what was wrong and rouse him, but perhaps he could buy some. Lan Wangji began to play a longer tune, generating a net of blue light that settled over the beast, tightening to hold it in place.

The beast shrugged them off like water, moving slowly, inexorably, forward.

Changing tactics, Lan Wangji grabbed Wei Ying by the arm, and jumped, carrying him up into a tree farther from the beast. He didn't know what to do. How to help him, how to stop this thing without him. Lan Wangji remembered how patiently his brother and uncle had drawn him out of his grief each month as a child, knowing he could not do the same. This abomination must be defeated, or it would eventually reach Yiling, and the Burial Mounds themselves. Grasping Wei Ying by the elbows, he pleaded, "Wei Ying! I need you!"

Wei Ying startled, snapping out of his catatonic state. He grasped Lan Wangji's forearms convulsively, though it made Chenqing dig in uncomfortably to his left arm. "Lan Zhan, that thing, it — you can't go near it."

"I know," he said, as soothingly as he could manage under the circumstances. "But we must destroy it."

Wei Ying shook his head, shifting closer to him on the tree branch so it swayed ominously. "You don't understand, I can't — you can't — it'll eat Bichen, you, anything in its path. You *can't* go near it."

“Wei Ying,” he repeated, deathly calm, and Wei Ying’s gaze snapped to his. “Can you feel anything from it? How we can defeat it?”

Swallowing heavily, Wei Ying shook his head. “I don’t need to. What it eats is incorporated into it. It’s nothing but ceaseless hunger and pain, bound together with the tattered ghosts of its victims, driven on by their confusion.”

“So we must break the bonds.” That sounded simple enough — but of course he could not see them, and Wei Ying was correct that they could not approach. Any piece hacked off would become a new threat.

“I suppose.” Again, Wei Ying was uncharacteristically hesitant, no brilliant plan forthcoming.

But perhaps, *he* had one. “Wei Ying, you remember how we cleansed Xia Jiayi of the puppets’ infection? We can do it together.”

They had achieved a miracle together once, why not again?

“You mean...?” Wei Ying’s brow furrowed in thought, and Lan Wangji worried at first he would say it was too dangerous, but he nodded, his eyes clearing in focus. “That could work, but we’ll have to immobilize it first.”

“I tried that already. It did not catch.”

“Didn’t you just say we’re stronger together?” Chenqing twirled through Wei Ying’s fingers as he raised it to his lips, and their discussion continued in song. This was not the same piece he had played earlier, but something new and terrible fashioned between them.

This time, their combined energy settled over the beast not like a net, but a river of gold and blue stars. Its foremost leg rose into the air, and froze there, the immobility spreading across its body in a wave. The beast was no less repulsive as a statue, as an impossibility of frozen flesh, and it was only a brief solution.

“We can’t have either of us fainting up here,” Wei Ying took his hand, and they dropped to the ground, landing a safe distance from the beast, in case any of its many mouths regained motion.

Now, they just had to repeat what they’d only attempted once before. It was shockingly easy to open the way for Wei Ying’s resentment to intertwine with his spiritual energy — or perhaps not surprising at all. Resentment was not spiritual energy, but it came from Wei Ying, and had they not Dual Cultivated, sharing their energy almost every day for months?

He felt Wei Ying simultaneously in and around him all at once in spirit, melding into one until he could no longer tell where he ended, and Wei Ying began. And he saw the beast through Wei Ying’s eyes.

Tattered had been a good word for the spirits within the construct. They appeared like a fraying netting that linked body and plant and stone one to another to his altered vision, and

all they needed to do was pick those fragile links apart. Like this, it was as easy as breathing to sever them one by one.

The vines went slack, and the monster fell apart piece by piece. A gnashing mouth went slack, the head of a leopard fell to the ground. Another body fell free, and another, and the entire construct slid apart into a grotesque pile of gore from which oozed stinking guts and juices of origins Lan Wangji did not care to think about.

The parts did not move.

Wei Ying's hand slipped from his, and he sank to the ground, clutching his knees against his chest.

Aching to reach out to him, he took a step toward Wei Ying, and stumbled. Wooziness rushed over him, and Lan Wangji thought he would faint. But Baoshan Sanren's advice was working, and he blinked the black spots that danced before his eyes away, and stayed upright.

The recent denial had helped too, more than he planned to admit to Wei Ying. Retaining his essence while receiving Wei Ying's was a very effective means of Dual Cultivation.

And now, Wei Ying needed him.

Lan Wangji knelt a short distance away, afraid he would shatter at the slightest touch, waiting for Wei Ying to give him some indication of how he could help.

Wei Ying did not remain silent long. "It looked like the monster that my parents died slaying. Less developed, but..."

Built from the same material.

He remembered, with horror, Wei Ying's tale of how he came to find his grandmothers, and how he witnessed that beast's last kill in its death throes. "Wei Ying, come here."

Wei Ying lurched into his arms with a sob, and Lan Wangji caught him against his chest, clinging on like he was all that kept him in one piece. Lan Wangji held on just as tight as he shook in his arms. So many years ago, Wei Ying's parents must have taken the framework of that other beast apart, and without the advantage of this sight lent by Wei Ying's deep understanding of resentment, the synchronicity of their music, they were forced to slice those bonds apart with the beast in motion, in close proximity with sharp teeth in gaping mouths.

"It can't be coincidence, can it? That the thief sent one of *those*?" Wei Ying whispered, his voice hoarse. A moment later he mumbled something, inaudible save for the last word. Impossible.

Lan Wangji didn't answer, only tightened his hold, uncaring of the tears that drenched his shoulder.

The glowing barrier around A-Ma's resting place looked the same, but it felt a little weaker.

She was supposed to be awake by now. Safe and healthy and vibrant as the day he first met her on the mountaintop. More so.

Instead she lay there, dead to the world, her fate hanging in the balance, because Wei Wuxian had failed.

Because he'd tried and failed to gain his brother-in-law's approval instead of taking the Yin Iron at the earliest opportunity.

Now there was a new threat, more powerful than the last, if its motives remained unclear. The world arrayed itself against him, instead.

And today, this monster from out of his worst memories. It could not have been anything but a message meant for him. But how could anyone even know? He'd never described it in the level of detail necessary to reproduce it to anyone. Only the Burial Mounds and their most dangerous ghost had ever known, had drawn that memory from his mind and used it to torment him.

Wei Wuxian's heartbeat thundered in his ears, breath coming far too quickly.

How had the thief known how to declare war in the way that would shake him most? To make sure he knew this was, somehow, *personal*?

Perhaps his nightmares would tell him.

There would be no avoiding those. Not tonight. He'd watch everyone he'd ever loved consumed and incorporated into the beast, a helpless child once again, only it wouldn't be a farmer he watched die. It would start with his parents. His martial aunts and uncles. His grandmothers, the Wen siblings, A-Yuan and A-Xi. Lan Zhan.

Lan Zhan squeezed his hand, reminding Wei Wuxian of his presence, grounding him.

No sense in working himself into another panic now when his sleeping mind would do that for him later. He squeezed back and smiled, knowing it was a weak attempt. They returned to their house together, and Wei Wuxian knelt behind the table where Lan Zhan often practiced his guqin. He looked through the books stacked upon it,

Lan Zhan hesitated in the doorway. "Do you want to be alone?"

"Alone?" He would shatter. "No, no. Definitely not. You're the best medicine for me right now."

"I'm... medicine," Lan Zhan smiled softly, stepping closer.

"Like a hot healing soup for my soul." Wei Wuxian already felt better, for the moment. Lan Zhan's smile had that effect.

"Wei Ying," he said, meaning *ridiculous*. And, softly, "What do you need?"



“I want you to sit on my cock while I read. You can play you guqin, or read with me, if you want, but I want to feel you and hold you close today.” He needed the intimacy, even if it was merely a mirage. The reminder that he was no longer the little boy helplessly watching as his world was torn away. That he was capable of taking care of those he loved.

Lan Zhan’s ears flushed prettily, even as his hands went to his belt. “Then relax, Wei Ying. I’ll get myself ready.”

When had his husband grown so bold?

“How can I relax when you’re giving me a show?” Wei Wuxian set down his book face down, and propped his chin up on his fist, watching him slowly, gracefully removed each layer. Lan Zhan took his time folding the layers and stacking them in a neat pile. Wei Wuxian raked his gaze across the planes of his back, the muscles flexing with each movement, at the long, nimble fingers that played his body as skillfully as the strings of his guqin, when he permitted it.

Using the lubricant he still kept in his robes, Lan Zhan reached between his legs, prepping himself quickly and roughly, biting his lip with eyes locked on his. A perfunctory act that nevertheless made Wei Wuxian’s body heat, for it revealed Lan Zhan’s eagerness for him. Another day, he might have ordered Lan Zhan to go slowly, but today he couldn’t wait to have him back safe in his arms, where he belonged.

As he watched, Wei Wuxian stretched out his legs, making room for his growing erection, and undid his robes, letting them fall open to reveal his chest. Lan Zhan stopped, letting out a short, sharp whine. He didn’t step forward yet, but his muscles tensed, waiting for permission.

“Why don’t you put on something light? There’s a bit of a chill, and I plan to keep you here for a while.”

Nodding, Lan Zhan turned to the shelf where they kept their toys in boxes, alongside a small but growing stack of negligees in red and black. Lan Zhan reached for the top one, and hesitated.

“What are these?” Lan Zhan picked up the necklace Wei Wuxian had made for him, left folded on a lacy robe as a surprise for after their ill-fated night hunt, and the small token that controlled it. The silver cord caught the fading light from the window, and glittered.

He’d almost forgotten about it, after the day’s events.

A thrill spread through his veins. “It’s a gift, for you, of course.”

“Wei Ying, I will run out of places to keep the things you give me soon.” Lan Zhan sighed, though he could not hide the pleased upturn of his lips.

“I haven’t given you anything like this. This is no ordinary necklace,” he teased, and Lan Zhan squinted down at it, trying to pick out what he’d woven into the knots. “I should

explain, before you put it on. A few weeks ago I told you there was something I couldn't give you, but — I thought of a way.”

“I don't understand,” Lan Zhan said.

“I can't choke you, but I'm an inventor. So I've invented a way to cut off your breath for a short while, if you're still interested.” He smiled, and it felt less fragile. “The token next to it controls it.”

“Wei Ying, you —” Lan Zhan broke off, concerned. “I don't wish you to think I would want you to ignore your limits for me.”

“I'm not. My limit was about your safety, not because I don't think it's hot. This is safe, I've tested it. It's easy to remove, just a matter of pushing the little ball-knot out of the loop. Safer than sparring with naked steel, and we do that all the time,” Wei Wuxian pointed out. Sure, they were both experienced swordsmen, but training accidents happened to everyone. All he'd done was make an alternative he felt comfortable with. “If either of us feel at all uncomfortable, we'll stop. I promise.”

Still, Lan Zhan frowned. “You tested it... on yourself?”

“Like I said, I'm sure it's safe. Felt like holding my breath underwater to me.” He shrugged. “I don't really get the appeal, but if you like it...”

Forgetting the robe, Lan Zhan threw himself down onto Wei Wuxian's lap, straddling his hips so he could hug him. “Thank you, Wei Ying.”

Wei Wuxian caught himself one-handed, his other arm wrapping around Lan Zhan's waist. He buried his nose in Lan Zhan's neck, inhaling the scent of him, as greedy for it as if he hadn't seen him in months. “Would you like me to put it on you?”

“Please,” Lan Zhan breathed, shifting on his lap.

Wei Wuxian took the necklace from him, and fastened it around his neck with the reverence due to a deity. He couldn't stop himself from tracing along the lower edge of the knots as he drew back, making Lan Zhan shiver under his touch.

Lan Zhan looked like he belonged to him.

Wei Wuxian's cock hardened under his ass, and he kissed his neck everywhere he could reach. “You like it?” Lan Zhan asked.

“You are indescribably beautiful.” Wei Wuxian nipped once with his teeth before retreating. “I love seeing you in things I made. You look like you're — mine.”

The word escaped his attempt to keep it in, but Lan Zhan kissed him before he could figure out how to take it back, messily and with passion. His head spinning under the onslaught, Wei Wuxian forgot why it had been a mistake.

“Can we try it now?” Lan Zhan asked, too excited to wait, his cock already hardening between them at the thought. Wei Wuxian loved seeing him like this, asking for what he wanted without a single thought about whether it was allowed.

“Give me the token.” He held his hand out palm up, and Lan Zhan obediently deposited it there. “Now ask me nicely.”

“Please, Wei Ying—”

Wei Wuxian activated the necklace, and his mouth hung open, hands going to his throat. Lan Zhan’s cock jumped and slapped against Wei Wuxian’s belly. Despite his confidence, the first use on Lan Zhan was nerve-racking, and Wei Wuxian counted to ten aloud, ready to tear it off him if it lasted one number too long.

But as the number ten left his mouth, Lan Zhan gasped, his hands dropping as he relaxed against Wei Wuxian’s chest. His belly was wet with Lan Zhan’s pre-cum, enough of it to dampen the top edge of his pants. It certainly seemed like he’d enjoyed it.

“Turtle?” he asked anyway.

Lan Zhan shook his head into his shoulder. “Do it again.”

“Are you telling me what to do?” He asked, amused. “And when you’re not even warming my cock yet.”

“Oh,” Lan Zhan reached down to free Wei Wuxian’s cock from the confines of his pants, stroking it as if to make up for the delay. “Where is my jar?”

He’d dropped it in flinging himself into Wei Wuxian’s lap, but Lan Zhan wasn’t the only one who could learn to carry around lubricant. Wei Wuxian produced his own from his sleeve, and proffered it. Lan Zhan warmed some between his hands before meticulously applying it to Wei Wuxian’s cock until he began to leak over his hands.

He sucked in a breath, and grabbed Lan Zhan’s ass, pushing up to lift him. “That’s enough. I need you on me. Now.”

Lan Zhan shifted to position himself, and when he began to take in his cock, Wei Wuxian added, “Oh, and Hanguang-jun? Come as much as you want tonight,” and activated the necklace again.

Wei Ying’s words barely registered in Lan Wangji’s mind against the feeling of sinking down onto him, his walls stretching to consume him. But his body recognized them.

His breath stopped, inhale and exhale suddenly impossible, no matter how he tried.

Everything whited out, subsumed in a sea of pleasure with no anchor. He came back to himself collapsed against Wei Ying’s shoulder again, with his fingers and toes still tingling.

“I... came.” He managed, from somewhere outside his body, feeling so weightless he was certain it was only Wei Ying’s hands gripping his hips that kept him from floating away, like

a feather on a light breeze.

“Are you comfortable there?” Wei Ying released his hips to rub his hands down his back, and if it were possible, Lan Wangji relaxed even further. Wei Ying had broken him and remade him and he would never move again.

“Hmmm,” he replied, which seemed sufficient.

“Keep drifting then, my Hanguang-jun. I’ll read to you, don’t worry about paying attention.” Wei Ying lazily scrawled a talisman in the air, lighting a candle.

“I was supposed to comfort you,” he protested weakly.

“Oh, you are. This is exactly what I need. Holding my brilliant, kind husband and taking care of him.” Wei Ying shifted him slightly so he could see his book around Lan Wangji’s head, and began to read it softly aloud against his ear.

A young magistrate’s son went hunting in the woods, and there spared a fox who turned out to be an immortal in disguise. As a reward, she led him to his deepest desire. The magistrate’s son was confused, at first, why she let him to a fisherman’s cottage by the sea — until he fell in love with the humble fisherman. The short story was from one of the books Wei Ying had given him, a gentle, romantic tale among an array of explicit anecdotes, sometimes romantic, sometimes not.

He’d wondered why Wei Ying included it. It made him wonder and worry that Wei Ying yearned for a love like that, and Lan Wangji would never be able to provide it. Here, now, feeling like a weightless bundle of feathers in Wei Ying’s arms as he listened, he did not worry.

When Wei Ying reached the confession, he paused in his reading to order, “Ride me while I read this part, Hanguang-jun.”

Startled, Lan Wangji jumped in his lap, causing his prostate to rub hard against Wei Ying’s cock on the way back down. He moaned, a loud, strange sound that sent a spark of embarrassment through him. But Wei Ying kissed his jaw, and smacked his ass, urging him on.

Shakily at first, he eased himself up and down, struggling to find a rhythm when he wanted nothing more than for Wei Ying to lay him on his back and rail him until his ears rang, stars flashed behind his eyelids, and he came dry. But he persevered, and his need took over, pushing him to ride faster, his nails digging into his shoulders as he used them for leverage. Wei Ying resumed reading, and he didn’t hear a word, only the cadence of his voice, strained and cracking at times, interrupted by panting, driving him toward the edge.

As tension built in his lower belly, Lan Wangji clenched down around Wei Ying, hoping to tip him over with him, to make him fuck up into him as they came together.

Only for Wei Ying to toss the book aside and grab his jaw, forcing him to meet his gaze.

“You’re not listening, are you? What was the last thing I said?”

“I —” Lan Wangji licked his lips, swallowed. “I did not know there would be a test.”

“Interesting. Keep moving, I didn’t tell you to stop” Wei Ying let go of his jaw and patted his cheek twice. It should have been patronizing, but the dark, delighted look in his eyes more than made up for it. “Is that your final answer?”

“Yes,” The word ended on a hiss when his throat constricted again, breath caught in his lungs as Wei Ying triggered his necklace, and tears leaked from his eyes. It was all he could do not to come before air rushed back in with a desperate gasp.

“I told you that you could come when you want. What are you waiting for?” Wei Ying demanded.

But that wasn’t what he *wanted*. What he knew Wei Ying *needed*, from his request for closeness.

“With you. *Please*.” Lan Wangji begged, no, sobbed. “Ple —”

His voice cut off without the breath to supply it.

Lan Wangji couldn’t stop himself that time, shaking as the dry orgasm washed over him. But as Lan Wangji’s walls contracted around him, Wei Ying made a strangled noise, biting down on his shoulder, his hips canting up to fill him with a sticky warmth.

Wei Ying did not give him time to recover before he tipped him over onto his back, and pulled out.

“Wei Ying, you’ll get the floor dirty,” he protested dazedly, but Wei Ying only grinned.

“Will I?” He scooted down between his legs, and licked the cum that had dripped down Lan Wangji’s thighs.

*More???* He thought, but it came out strangled and unintelligible.

“Delicious.” Wei Ying licked a white droplet from his lips. “I’m going to eat you right up.”

“Wei Ying, wait —” Lan Wangji scolded, only to change his mind as Wei Ying’s tongue tickled the crease of his ass — and paused.

“Wait?” Wei Ying asked.

“No. Yes.” That didn’t make sense, and Wei Ying’s mouth still wasn’t on him. “Eat me, please.”

“I thought so.” Wei Ying dove back in, licking his own spend as it leaked from Lan Wangji, careful not to delve too deep into Lan Wangji’s overstimulated hole. “You taste better every time, how is that possible?”

Lan Wangji didn’t know, he was too busy trying to squirm, scarcely aware of the wood against his spine, even as Wei Ying held his thighs in place. He’d only just stopped crying,

but tears welled up in his eyes, and spilled over the corners. He blinked them away, lifting his head to watch.

It was not long before he stirred yet again, twitching as Wei Ying laved at his rim, cock filling even as his limbs melted into the floor. Only when Wei Ying was satisfied with his work did he turn his attention to the rest of Lan Wangji. The spend from his first orgasm had long since dried on his belly, and Wei Ying reached up to trace its bath from the highest spatter, and finally down to his cock. Taking him in hand, Wei Ying licked along his length before swallowing him down.

His hands clenched around air and his head turned from side to side, almost involuntarily, as he tried to keep from thrusting into Wei Ying's mouth. Wei Ying released him with a wet popping sound. "You have permission to pull my hair today."

Lan Wangji's hands wound in his hair, already pulling, before Wei Ying kissed the tip of his cock, over and over, almost like a peck on the lips but with the barest hint of suction. With his other hand, Wei Ying fondled his balls lazily, without real intent. Lan Wangji begged, twisted, sobbed, tried to buck his hips, pulled harder, to make Wei Ying do something, anything else, but Wei Ying's forearms, braced on his thighs, kept him pinned to the floor.

Only when Wei Ying wanted to, he parted his lips to envelop the tip, sucking hard, and Lan Wangji's head thumped back. Not hard enough to hurt, but he jerked harder than he meant to on Wei Ying's hair, and he moaned around him. Lan Wangji came without warning, and Wei Ying swallowed around him, drawing his orgasm out into a stretch of eternity.

He wasn't aware of it ending, only of Wei Ying lifting him onto their bed, arranging him under the blankets. His stomach had been wiped clean, and steam drifted from the spout of the teapot.

"There you are," Wei Ying said, giving him a soft smile, like Lan Wangji really had been everything he needed in submitting, in letting Wei Ying do to him as he wished. If such a thing were possible. He felt sure, as Wei Ying climbed into bed with him, as he blew on a cup of tea before raising it to Lan Wangji's lips, and snuggled into his side, that he had been a comfort in some small way.

"Ah, Lan Zhan. You look like a dream." Wei Ying whispered, low enough Lan Wangji was not certain he had been meant to hear.

Lan Wangji could not have replied if he wanted to. Wei Ying had fucked the voice out of him. All he could do was let Wei Ying take care of him.

In the early hours of the morning, Lan Wangji woke for the second time that night to Wei Ying clinging to him and shaking. This time, when he calmed, Wei Ying slipped under the covers to suck him off again, artlessly, insisting he needed to, before falling back to sleep on his thigh.

Lan Wangji would have liked to stay, and watch him sleep, be there for him if he thrashed himself awake a third time. But he was the sect leader's husband, and he had duties.

In particular, a few early-rising disciples had realized they could get additional assistance if they joined in his morning practice. They would be disappointed if he did not show, and he could modify his exercises so as not to worsen the pleasant soreness in his lower back without them noticing. It was not an unpleasant way to start the day.

At midday, Lan Wangji thought he would bring his husband a meal, and share it. Perhaps Wei Ying might peck him, thoughtlessly, on the lips, and make a statement that Wei Ying would somehow find funny, and make his day a little brighter. It could not be easy for him, today.

And that was why he could not confess, not yet. Wei Ying needed time to recover from the shock.

He had to *find* his husband first.

No one seemed to have seen him yet that day. Lan Wangji hoped he had not gone off to hunt a new threat on his own, or gone back to the mountain again without him. The last place he looked should have been the first — at Lan Yi's side.

Within the cave, Wei Ying huddled together with Wen Qing, speaking quietly. They did not notice him, and he did not make his presence known. Wei Ying's hands were in motion, and his gestures were enough for Lan Wangji to piece together he was telling her of yesterday's night hunt. Wen Qing gestured to the Yin Iron, floating in its prison, and Wei Ying nodded.

This was the second time in as many days they had met without him, but there were more such occurrences, scattered back the length of his marriage, always something they weren't saying on the occasions he was included.

A sharp pain started below his breastbone, that did not fade no matter how he rubbed at it. His stomach became a churning pit, hunger turned to nausea. He turned away without alerting them to his presence. The tray of food, he gave to a pair of construction workers heading to their break.

He walked off, listless, into the woods, until he reached the fossilized tree trunk by the river, where Wei Ying had first fucked him. He sat down on it heavily, staring into the water where he had once dared to be bold.

He wished he could be bold again now.

Lan Wangji had tried very hard not to feel excluded by Wei Ying and Wen Qing's secrecy. They had been friends for years; Lan Wangji was the interloper. It was up to Lan Wangji to earn their confidence, and if Wei Ying never wished to share what had befallen him when the Burial Mounds were a hellscape on the mortal plane, Lan Wangji could accept that. It was reasonable to wish to forget.

He could comfort Wei Ying when he needed it without knowing every detail. That, he did not mind. He doubted Wen Qing knew the whole story either.

Yet he could not understand why Wei Ying would not share his theories on destroying the Yin Iron. Surely Lan Wangji could help.

A sob threatened in his chest, and Lan Wangji shoved it forcefully back. He couldn't understand why Wei Ying wouldn't let him help.

The memory of Wei Ying's whispered worry that the monster couldn't be coincidence struck him. How could he be so convinced of a direct connection? The Yin Iron had contaminated the Burial Mounds, certainly, and that contamination created the monster that killed his parents. Almost certainly, the current user of the Yin Iron had created this one. But nothing living had ever walked out of the Burial Mounds before Wei Ying. No one knew he had been a little orphan boy in Yiling two decades ago, or how his parents died. No one could have sent such a monster against them.

Lan Wangji could not shake the feeling he needed to know what Wei Ying was hiding.

Yet he did not know how to press.

## Chapter End Notes



[Promo Tweet](#)



# Chapter 18

## Chapter Summary

The Jin host a crowd hunt without Meng Yao's expertise. Wangxian spend the crowd hunt being horny (and maybe getting some investigation done I guess)

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** The first scene of this chapter involves public use of a remote controlled vibrator. If that's not your thing, you can skip to: "Wei Wuxian made sure to walk slowly." If you'd also like to skip outdoor sex in the woods, you can skip to "yes, yes, I'll cuddle you first." You won't miss any plot that's not mentioned later in the chapter.

Many many thanks to Jehan for betaing this chapter! 💕💕💕

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The Yiling Laozu arrived in Lanling in a cloud of darkness, his husband on his arm, and a half-dozen disciples arrayed behind him. The population of Koi Tower had almost steeled themselves to expect it, save for one thing:

The Yiling Laozu appeared at the *bottom* of the steps.

To show respect for the new Chief Cultivator? To demonstrate he was willing to pretend the laws of the Cultivation World could hold him? To make a dramatic entrance as he mounted the steps, lavishly embroidered robes swishing behind him?

They did not know he had chosen where to arrive simply because his husband said it was wise, and would leave his enemies' minds spinning in confusion.

Lan Wangji had yet to broach the topic of Wei Ying's secrets. He thought about it. Often. But then Wei Ying looked at him, and he melted into a mindless puddle, craving nothing but his touch.

He was working on overcoming the melting.

When he wasn't dressed from head to toe in symbols of Wei Ying's ownership, that was. His robes matched Wei Ying's perfectly, down to the spatter of silver stars on his black outer robe that increased in density towards the hem like the Silver River of the night sky. Only his forehead ribbon, the sheath of his sword, and the ornament that had been Wei Ying's first gift

to him, hanging from his belt, marked him as a Lan. Beneath his red inner robe, Lan Wangji wore not only the necklace, no, collar that Wei Ying had made for him, but a new invention, thoroughly concealed from view.

Shifting inside him with every step.

They had arrived just in time for the crowd hunt's opening ceremony. Only thanks to Wen Ning – Lan Wangji's lifelong dedication to punctuality had not survived Wei Ying.

It especially had not survived Wei Ying giving him an all too brief preview of what the invention seated within him could do. He'd been sucking on the sensitive spot on Wei Ying's collarbone, trying to convince him to give in *now*, all thoughts of hunts and conferences forgotten, when Wen Ning rapped on the door with a very long stick.

Wen Ning led the two disciples they had brought over to join those assembled on the archery range as Lan Wangji and Wei Ying were directed to a pair of empty seats under a shaded pavilion, at the far end next to Sect Leader Yao.

"How are your..." Wei Ying checked the notes Lan Wangji had prepared for him in advance — as he would be in no condition to hold a conversation in short order — hidden in his sleeve as he took his seat. "... recruitment efforts going?"

Sect Leader Yao began to bloviate characteristically. Lan Wangji did not spare a moment's thought for his words, focusing instead on slowly, gingerly lowering himself into his seat.

Despite his efforts, the pressure forced the plug deeper within him. He pressed his lips together, careful not to let a sound escape, unused to the need to be subtle. His fingers twitched toward the token that controlled his collar.

*You're not to use this unless you'll give yourself away otherwise, understand?* Wei Ying had whispered against his ear as he fastened the token to his belt and Lan Wangji had foolishly nodded his agreement. He would have to fight to stay present, to suppress the whimpers and moans Wei Ying usually encouraged.

A hand on the token in his sleeve, Wei Ying glanced at him, a wordless check in. He nodded. Any shame he felt blended with anticipation, with the heat building in his groin.

Sect Leader Yao fell silent as the assembled cultivators' attention shifted down to the archery range. And within him, the plug began to vibrate like it was the just-plucked string of a guqin. The vibrations faded, and built again.

Lan Wangji could do nothing but ride out each wave, forcing his posture upright, permitting nothing but blank boredom into his expression. He was vaguely aware that Jin Zixun was speaking, so really, there was nothing for Lan Wangji to pay attention to.

Something something about his overconfidence in Jin superiority, probably. All that mattered was keeping his lips shut, his breathing steady. Fighting the urge to move. He needed it to stop. He needed more.

By the time Jin Zixun was done being long-winded, for now, and the first disciple stepped up to show their prowess, Lan Wangji had begun to get used to the sensation. Of course, Wei Ying couldn't let that stand.

He stiffened, jaw dropping, letting out a ragged breath as the plug gave a series of sharp pulses, and clamped his mouth shut. A few sect leaders on the other side of Wei Ying looked over — not Sect Leader Yao thankfully, he was busy yelling at a disciple who was presumably his own on the range. Lan Wangji managed a cold, dismissive glare, and they looked away, chastised.

A disciple in Yiling Wei colors stepped to the mark, but he didn't see who before the vibrations surged to an unbearable level. Forcing him to duck his head and squeeze his eyes shut. Before pulling back to a middling strength that nonetheless left him shifting helplessly in his seat, thighs rubbing together, desperate for friction.

Someone made an excellent shot, and the onlookers cheered. Wei Ying seized the opportunity to lean over and whisper in his ear. "Remember, if you come, you'll have to walk around with your trousers wet, sticky with the evidence of what I do to you."

He shivered, wanting that, without a hint of care for how improper it would be. Impropriety had ceased to matter when he got down on his knees for Wei Ying on a riverbank at midday, when he implied before his brother and the world that they'd fucked all night, when the words *marry me* first crossed his lips. Dirty wasn't bad, if it was Wei Ying who dirtied him. He could not be promiscuous with his own husband. Wei Ying could, *should* make a mess of him wherever and whenever he wanted. His cock already slipped against the silk, which gave him an idea.

Lan Wangji did not dare speak aloud, the slightest parting of his lips would let loose desperate, unmistakable sobs, revealing his shameless depravity to the world. But he could show Wei Ying his meaning.

Parting his robes just enough to show Wei Ying the wet spot on his tented trousers, where pre-cum made the silk cling to his cock, he watched for his reaction with bated breath.

Catching his movement from the corner of his eye, Wei Ying looked, and his expression went dark and ravenous, the bulge in his throat bobbing as he swallowed heavily. His lips formed the shape of *Hanguang-jun*, though Lan Wangji could not tell whether he spoke aloud over the buzzing in his ears, reverberating through his limbs.

The moment the crowd burst into another round of applause, Wei Ying returned the plug back to the sharp, intense pulses, where pain merged with pleasure and dark, colorful blotches threatened at the edge of his vision. He ground down against it, instinctive, driving it deeper, harder against the place he needed it most. The last dregs of his control slipped.

Lan Wangji fumbled for the token for his collar, catching it just in time to stop the building whine from escaping — and in time for Wei Ying to turn the plug up to its highest setting.

His vision went white. Only the collar's restriction on his voice kept him from screaming. Warm, viscous fluid flooded his pants, making a mess of him beneath the cultivation world's

nose. The image of some faceless, unimportant person noticing, who would never be believed if they tried to expose the true flagrant wanton nature of the upright, unshakable Hanguang-jun sent a dark thrill straight to his core, intensifying his orgasm, stretching it out so long he thought the entirety of the crowd hunt must have passed while he was lost in his body's fulfillment.

But his collar released, and the final archer set fly her arrows. The crowd's cheering covered an overstimulated whimper.

Wei Ying turned the plug down to its lowest setting, leaving it there to wring the aftershocks from him. His cum pooled between his thighs, settling into the silk of his trousers, leaving him dazed and needy. Unthinking, Lan Wangji grabbed blindly for Wei Ying's hand.

Wei Ying threaded his fingers between his, lifting their joined hands to his lips for a kiss.

He did not turn off the plug.

It was too much, the need to squirm away, to get it *out*, rapidly becoming overwhelming. For a moment, his safe word hovered on his lips.

But then Wei Ying pulled him to his feet, the audience rising for the start of the crowd hunt, changing the angle enough that it was bearable. More than, a pleasant, initially dull arousal spiking through him with each step as Wei Ying led him down to the archery range.

"Wen Ning hit the bull's eye three times in a row — a tie with Jin Zixuan." Wei Ying filled him in, fortunately, just before they reached their disciples, standing in an uncertain group. "Congratulations, Wen Ning! I knew you could do it. And the rest of you did quite well too, Xiujuan especially, placing just after Yunmeng Jiang's second disciple at your first competition!"

"Congratulations," Lan Wangji agreed, grateful nothing more was expected of him. The trails of cum dripping down his inner thighs, the squishiness of the fabric at their apex, prevented more complex thought. Along with the ever-present vibrations.

"Thank you, Zongzhu, Hanguang-jun!" Wen Ning chirped brightly, as far from the image of his great and terrible uncle as could possibly be achieved.

Wei Ying clapped Wen Ning on the shoulder and sent him off to lead the disciples in the crowd hunt. Leaning against Lan Wangji's shoulder — though his knees were presently of uncertain stability — Wei Ying sighed like a proud parent, waving them off. "Ah, they grow up so fast."

Lan Wangji did not point out that Wen Ning was a mere three years younger than himself.

"You're not going to participate in the hunt, Laozu?" Sect Leader Yao asked in his loud, nasal voice, drawing the attention of other sect leaders, giving their disciples last minute instructions, nearby.

He couldn't have given Wei Wuxian a better opening. "I wouldn't want anyone claiming it was all my doing when my disciples win. My husband and I will join Madame Jin in the observation platform shortly."

Yiling Wei wouldn't really win. But that was the point – showing the cultivation world he was not an inhuman threat. That he was capable of humility, and intended to put his disciples on equal footing with those of other sects, or even at a disadvantage, for other sect leaders would join.

Wei Wuxian made sure to walk slowly, letting Lan Zhan surreptitiously lean on him as they made their way to a secluded spot in the trees, blocked off on all sides by underbrush.

So very like the first time Wei Wuxian had him on his knees, minus the soothing sound of a rushing river.

Letting go of Lan Zhan, he reached into his sleeve, and rummaged around for a qiankun bag. "I have spare trousers for you here somewhere."

Lan Zhan made an impatient, offended sound, right on cue. "Aren't you going to finish what you started?"

He really did have spare trousers, as well as his own change of clothes for the next day, as they were expected to stay overnight. Wei Wuxian pulled out the bag containing them and let it dangle from his forefinger, swinging in the air. Lan Zhan followed it with his eyes even as he slumped back against the nearest tree to shore up his knees against the incessant vibrations.

This device Wei Wuxian fully understood the appeal of, having tried a prototype on himself, while Lan Zhan waited across the room with his hands bound behind his back and secured to his ankles.

"Here? Now? Where anyone could stumble in on us?" Wei Wuxian paused in his rummaging to clap a hand over his heart. "What a scandalous suggestion."

They couldn't, really, not without plenty of warning. And Lan Zhan knew it too. That was the thrill of it. Wei Wuxian just needed him to admit it. And then Lan Zhan could have everything he needed.

"You're concerned about someone seeing us after that."

Lan Zhan's lower lip stuck out, tempting him to bite. He loved when his husband got pouty and impatient. Demanding, asking, begging for what he wanted, trusting Wei Wuxian to give it to him. It almost made him want to forgo the game, to drag his beautiful Hanguang-jun down into a nest of grasses to rut against each other while Lan Zhan turned his neck black and blue with lips and teeth.

Almost.

"After what, Lan Zhan, hmm?" He flashed a wicked grin over his shoulder.

The corner of Lan Zhan's mouth twitched. He didn't want to be amused. But then it softened into a half smile and a long-suffering eye roll. "After you made me come in my pants. In front of everyone."

Wei Wuxian dropped the pretense of fishing around in his sleeve, and surged forward to cage Lan Zhan in against the tree. "Hanguang-jun, who made you lose your sense of shame? I miss your cute little red ears."

"You did." Lan Zhan rolled his hips against him, reminding him of his own long-ignored desire, but his ears flushed right on cue. Wei Wuxian nipped at the tip of one, dragging his teeth along hot, sensitive skin before releasing at the curve.

"That's right. You're greedy for everything I give you. You'll be good and take it, won't you? This hurts, it's too much, but it's exactly what you need. You'll let me wring you out and never let on that your thighs feel like water and you're wincing with every step in front of everyone else. You'll feel their eyes on you, wondering if they *know*, if there's a mark you didn't cover up, a hair out of place. And then you'll need me all over again, won't be able to stop yourself from rubbing your thighs together."

Biting back a strangled sound, Lan Zhan reached down to grasp the token at his belt, but Wei Wuxian smacked his hand away. "Ah ah, my naughty boy. This is mine now," he undid the knot holding the token one-handed, and stashed it up his sleeve. His robes, tied for easy removal, fell apart easily under his touch. "You won't be needing it. If anyone hears, they'll think you're a wounded beast someone else got to first. And they wouldn't be entirely wrong, would they?"

Wei Wuxian turned the plug up to a setting where it pulsed, strong but teasing, as he pinned Lan Zhan's shoulders to the bark, shoving a thigh between Lan Zhan's legs as he cried out, bucking against him. Reaching beneath the waist of his pants. Wei Wuxian was met with stickiness, coating the hot, heavy length of him.

"So messy, Hanguang-jun. I warned you, but you like being filthy."

"Yes —" Lan Zhan thrust into his hand, the sound he made as inhuman as Wei Wuxian predicted, pulling Wei Wuxian against him with his hands on his ass. They couldn't have that.

Grabbing both his wrists, he pinned them against the bark over his head, and held them there one-handed. "No touching," he hissed. "If you want friction, you'll squirm for it."

Lan Zhan did, and his hip ground against Wei Wuxian's cock, making him weak in the knees, threatening his focus on Lan Zhan's pleasure.

"So you can do what you're told." With his other hand, he stroked roughly along Lan Zhan's length. Lan Zhan's eyes fluttered closed, only for him to force them open without having to be told, straining to keep his eyes on Wei Wuxian. "See? Good boys get rewards."

"More, please, Wei Ying, I'm so close." His eyes squeezed shut, throat straining against a keening sound.

Wei Wuxian laughed, delighted.

“Hanguang-jun is insatiable. I say he’s good and he only wants more.” He needed one hand to control the plug, but — “Keep your hands there.”

Letting go, he shoved his first two fingers in Lan Zhan’s mouth. And pausing to make sure Lan Zhan did as ordered, his hands locked together overhead, he kissed him for good measure, swallowing his moans, lest he be mistaken for the crowd hunt’s prey, and bring every cultivator on the mountain chasing after them.

He felt liquid, hot, needy, devouring every muffled sound Lan Zhan gave him.

This time, he didn’t turn the plug down immediately, carrying Lan Zhan to new heights as he thrashed beneath his grip. Each buck of Lan Zhan’s hips ground against his cock until he spilled over within his robes, gasping against his lips.

They slid to the ground together, Wei Wuxian fumbling to return the plug to inert jade.

“Good thing we never had the chance to unpack, because now *I* need to change,” he giggled.

Lan Zhan shook his head into his chest, clinging to him.

“Yes, yes, I’ll cuddle you first,” he giggled. They sat there, in each others’ arms, until they really needed to compose themselves and Wei Wuxian pulled a piece of bark from his husband’s hair. “Oh, your hair’s a disaster.”

Lan Zhan put a hand to his head, and found his guan askew, the back of his hair tangled from being knocked up against a tree. His eyes widened.

“Ah, Lan Zhan, Lan Zhan, don’t worry, I’ve got you. I planned for this, to wreck you *and* put you back together.” He shifted onto his knees, so they framed Lan Zhan’s back and pulled a comb from his sleeve. “What kind of husband would I be if I hadn’t?”

He ignored the stirring of guilt at the thought of the kind of husband he was, really.

At his leisure, Wei Wuxian worked the comb through Lan Zhan’s hair, humming as Lan Zhan relaxed under his touch. “We should do this more often, Lan Zhan. Would you comb my hair in return? Even though it’s a terrible, knotted mess in comparison?”

“It is a husband’s duty,” Lan Zhan mumbled, solemn, though his eyes were closed.

As Wei Wuxian fastened his guan back in place, tension returned to Lan Zhan’s shoulders. “Wei Ying, when we get back, will you —”

He paused.

“What is it?” Wei Wuxian asked, with a flicker of unease that Lan Zhan’s continued hesitation only reinforced.

“I need to know —”

“I swear I saw it come this way,” a nasal, whiny voice proclaimed.

“Zixun, slow down,” Jin Zixuan called, naming the cousin whose name Wei Wuxian had forgotten in the time it took to fuck.

“Just a little further,” Jin Zixun insisted, uncomfortably close to their position.

They looked at each other, and scrambled to dress, storing away the plug, exchanging ruined pants for fresh, and hurriedly setting robes to rights. A twig snapped and leaves crackled just outside their little sanctuary just as they finished dressing.

“Zixuan made up the measuring snake,” Mianmian was saying.

“What?” Jin Zixun demanded.

“I panicked!” Jin Zixuan said.

“You were sneaking off with your betrothed unchaperoned?” Jin Zixun, who did not seem like the type to be throwing stones about premarital relations, was scandalized.

“What am I, a tree?” Mianmian grumbled.

Wei Wuxian lost the battle against his amusement, snickering into his hand.

“Who’s there?” Annoying Nephew — Jin Zixun — demanded.

Jin Zixuan and Mianmian’s hands were on the hilt of their swords, half-drawn, but Jin Zixun attacked without waiting to find out what — or who — he was facing. Lan Zhan deflected him with a still-sheathed Bichen, sending him crashing into a tree.

Mianmian — amused — and Jin Zixuan — looking like he wished he’d stayed in bed — fully sheathed their swords.

“Peacock, Jiang-guniang.” He gave an awkward bow. “Hi Mianmian!”

Lan Zhan plucked a leaf they’d missed before out of his hair. Wei Wuxian smiled at him in thanks.

Jiang Yanli bowed back, and addressed Lan Zhan. “I would have expected a family reunion, but your brother couldn’t come?”

“The Cloud Recesses is still rebuilding.” Lan Zhan said. “And your brother?”

“The same. He protested extensively against my attending until Mianmian promised to protect my virtue with her life.” She smiled fondly.

“I lied. I’ll only protect it if you want me to.” Mianmian said, and Jiang Yanli patted her arm.

Jin Zixuan turned a vivid red.

“If there’s no snake, what were you hunting back there?” Jin Zixun demanded.



“Isn’t it obvious?” Wei Wuxian drawled.

“What do you mean, obvious?” Jin Zixun demanded. “I don’t see you carrying a trophy. And didn’t I hear you say you wouldn’t be participating?”

Oh, this was too good. “We aren’t.”

Jin Zixun’s eyes narrowed. “What were you up to hidden in the woods then?”

“They’re newlyweds, nephew. Surely all that money you’ve spent on women has taught you something.” Madame Jin appeared with an entourage. “Though I wouldn’t blame them for taking it and leaving.”

Jin Zixun sputtered. “You mean? The Yiling Laozu and — and — Hanguang-jun? They actually? *Hanguang-jun*?”

Lan Zhan gave a soft, amused huff that only Wei Wuxian heard.

“Go find something to butcher.” She paid him no more mind, though he had not yet left. “Jiang-guniang, I trust my son has learned some manners.”

“He is making an effort. It’s...” Jiang Yanli paused, searching for the right word, and settled on, “adorable.”

Madame Jin considered. “Do you like adorable?”

“I do. Very much.” Jiang Yanli said, and Jin Zixuan’s fading blush returned to the shade of a ripe tomato.

“Then I expect you will make a better match than your mother and I hoped.” Madame Jin nodded in satisfaction. “But for now, perhaps you’d like to get to know your mother-in-law better? Your dress is too pretty for all this traipsing around in the woods, and my son should get in a *few* kills for the hunt.”

As they began to depart, Wei Wuxian remembered something else Lan Zhan had up his sleeve. “Mianmian! We have something for you. Lan Zhan, you have it right?”

He nodded, producing a long, thin object wrapped in a mint-green cloth embroidered with swallows — Wen Qing had given him a courting gift for safekeeping. Wei Wuxian had played up the insult to his honor. But to be honest, he was just glad she wasn’t letting him hold her back anymore.

“Perhaps it isn’t best if the man many people think broke my heart is not seen giving me a courting gift?” Mianmian glanced surreptitiously at Madame Jin’s following, who turned back with curious glances.

“Then I suppose this is for Jin Zixuan, and will definitely not make it into Mianmian’s hands later.” Wei Wuxian took the package from Lan Zhan, and thrust it at Jin Zixuan. Madame Jin’s attendants shrugged, and continued on after their mistress.

“Thank you?” Jin Zixuan accepted the package, and turned it over, perplexed. As usual, he had only half paid attention to anything other than Jiang Yanli.

Mianmian elbowed him in the side.

Where outdoors, drinking merrily to the start of the crowd hunt, Jin Guangshan had appeared boisterous and vital, the dimmer light of the banquet hall lent a sickly cast to his features. His skin seemed to sag from his jowls, like it had come loose from muscle and skeleton. Yet he hadn’t lost weight, and seemed in personality as much of a boisterous bully as ever. Just before he stood, he spat a solid-looking glob into a waiting dish.

“Welcome, everyone. Before we may all partake in the banquet, there are a few formalities to address. First, the winners of the day’s events. In the archery competition, in third place we have a Jiang outer disciple,” *How quaint*, said Jin Guangshan’s smile. “Dong Haiyi. Tied for first, my beloved son, Jin Zixuan and... *Wen Ning*, of Yiling...”

“Yiling Wei, Jin-zongzhu.” Wei Wuxian said pleasantly.

All three winners stood and bowed.

“Tell me, Wei-zongzhu, where did you find this talented disciple of yours?”

“He is the younger brother of my first disciple. You may recall Wen Qing, my first disciple? It was her medical expertise you relied on in delivering those... difficult puppet-infected cases to Yiling.” Wei Wuxian’s smile was more of a grimace. “Wen Ning is a skilled archer, I’m very proud of his progress. But he prefers the gentlemanly arts to the sword, I believe you’ll find.”

“Matching my son in skill is no easy feat, but you did have the benefit of Hanguang-jun’s tutelage.”

Wen Ning knew not to correct Jin Guangshan, not to say that he had learned to shoot in Qishan, on his own, and with some pointers from the Yiling Laozu. They needed to be unthreatening, standing out enough in the archery competition not to be a joke, but only a middling to low performance in the crowd hunt itself.

“Difficult cases, you say?” The Lan representative, a graying elder, frowned, the pattern of their wrinkles reminiscent of Lan Qiren’s. “The patients treated by the Lan Sect were all more or less the same when they arrived.”

“A difficulty in transit destabilized several of ours,” Jin Guangshan lied, dismissing, the subject. “The winners of the Crowd Hunt! Individually, Lan Qiaohui and Nie Xiaodan worked together to defeat a horde of giant bat monsters, and proceeded to work together through the remainder of the event. They will both place second, due to an uncertainty in the count —” meaning they hadn’t bothered to keep track of who killed what—“and my son’s personal companion, Luo Qingyang, placed first. Apparently, my son was distracted, courting his betrothed.”

That earned a laugh from much of the room, and Wei Wuxian politely joined in. Despite the implication that if Jin Zixuan *had* performed his best, he would have easily outshone them all.

“We greatly anticipate the joining of Jin and Jiang in the coming months.” Jin Guangshan continued, “the marriage of a man’s only son is one of the greatest days of his life, the securing of his legacy.”

Wei Wuxian wasn’t the only one who glanced at Meng Yao, attending at Nie Mingjue’s side — and apparently paying no attention, both he and his sect leader having turned to listen to a disciple seated behind them. A show of apathy, perhaps, but a convincing one.

“The placement of the sects was similar to the individual results —” the Nie had in fact placed first, with fewer participating disciples than the Jin, but Jin Guangshan avoided admitting that. “Not a single one of the beasts my nephew collected for the event remain on Phoenix Mountain, congratulations to all the participants.”

The Crowd Hunt had lasted only three hours of the projected six before the last of the prey collected for the event was killed. The banquet would be held early, with few of the slow-cooking meat dishes yet ready.

“Now, for the position of Chief Cultivator. I greatly appreciate the support received over the last few months from many of those present today. May we begin the confirmation with Sect Leader Ouyang?”

Votes of approval wound their way around the room, even from Nie Mingjue, as agreed at the conclusion of the Sunshot Campaign. When the sect leader seated to Wei Wuxian’s left said his piece. He remained silent, until Jin Guangshan cleared his throat, a loud, wet sound that came from his lungs.

“Oh, do I get a vote?” He asked, brightly. “I think the approval of so many others speaks for itself. Congratulations, Xiandu.”

The last few sect leaders after him made the vote unanimous. Not that there was any choice, without Nie Mingjue or Lan Xichen ready to stand as an alternative.

“Please. Eat, drink, enjoy your fill of the bounty of this bright new world we’ve made, out from under the shadow of Qishan Wen. Lanling Jin and your new Chief Cultivator have spared no expense.”

He lifted a cup of wine in toast, and all save the Lan drank their own cups down in unison.

He sat, and as the room filled with the clinking of chopsticks against porcelain, turned away. Wei Wuxian didn’t think anyone else noticed, busy filling their stomach’s after a long afternoon, but Jin Guangshan hacked into his bowl again.

“The effects of poorly managed demonic cultivation?” Lan Zhan asked over a sip of tea.

“It could just be from when he touched the Yin Iron at Nightless City.” Wei Wuxian said. He couldn’t be certain. Lan Yi and Xue Chonghai had both been far more powerful cultivators than Jin Guangshan when they first laid hands on the Yin Iron. As had Wen Ruohan for that matter. Who was to say what a single touch could do to a man like Jin Guangshan?

But he doubted it.

Further observation was interrupted when Jin Zixun decided he had not been humiliated enough for one day, swaggering over with a jar of wine and a full cup. “Hanguang-jun didn’t drink the toast. Are you refusing to acknowledge Xiandu’s authority?”

Lan Zhan ignored him.

“You’re not a Lan anymore, drink up.” Jin Zixun pushed the cup at Lan Zhan’s face, forcing him to push it away.

“My husband is free to choose which disciplines of his natal sect he wishes to follow.” Wei Wuxian said coldly, plucking the cup from Jin Zixun’s grasp. “I’ll drink for him.”

He swallowed it in one gulp, grimacing. It wasn’t even good wine, unlike the jar already on his table.

“I guess some people like them frigid.” Jin Zixun grumbled under his breath.

Wei Wuxian knew Jin Zixun was cruel, callous, annoying, but ultimately insignificant. But a rush of anger at his words made him want to tear out his throat with his bare hands. Resentment, barely used in months aside from against the beast, and their transport here from Yiling, swirled within him like a caged tiger. There was a reservoir of it beneath Koi Tower, infusing the land like a cemetery rather than a cultivation sect. Had he been less balanced in his cultivation, he might have lunged across the low table for him.

Instead, he grinned over barred teeth, and Jin Zixun scrambled back, nearly falling on his ass.

Lan Zhan grabbed his hand, and his awareness of the resentment faded, centering in on warm skin against his, sparks racing across the points of contact. “Your eyes,” he said, a warning even as his voice held admiration.

Wei Wuxian breathed out the last of the resentment, forcing his irises back from red just in time for a Lan elder, attending in the place of their sect leader, to approach, leaning heavily on their cane.

“The audacity of that brat to talk about respect,” the elder narrowed their eyes at Jin Zixun, lifting Wei Wuxian’s mood considerably.

“My apologies for my cousin, Elder, Lan Wangji.” Jin Zixun finally materialized, and grabbed Jin Zixun by the back of his collar. “He knows better, but doesn’t care. My mother will remind him of his manners.”

“Good luck to her then,” The elder said. “She’ll need it.”

Jin Zixuan bowed, forcing his cousin to as well, before dragging him across the room.

“Er-gongzi,” the elder greeted him. Lan Wangji started to rise to bow, but the elder waved him down with a humph. “I see you’re alive, and none the worse for wear.”

“My husband takes excellent care of me,” Lan Zhan said.

“Lan Zhan is the one who takes care of me.” He took Lan Zhan’s hand and kissed his fingers under the elder’s discerning gaze.

The elder grunted and nodded to himself. “When can I tell Qiren to expect children?”

Wei Wuxian choked on his drink, and sputtered as Lan Zhan patted his back.

“Please inform him that my answer has not changed,” Lan Zhan said, making Wei Wuxian wheeze harder.

Lan Zhan’s uncle wanted grandkids? And Lan Zhan hadn’t said a word!

“I will inform Lan-zongzhu that you appear healthy, in body and spirit,” The elder decided, after a moment longer of scrutiny.

Lan Zhan inclined his head in thanks.

Wei Wuxian managed to regain the ability to breathe only after the elder had already walked away. “What was your answer? About children?”

“That we would discuss it when matters are more settled.” Lan Zhan said, almost shy. “I would like them eventually.”

Wei Wuxian pushed down the image of Lan Zhan with A-Xi in his lap, A-Yuan climbing all over him. Lan Zhan wouldn’t want that, not when he learned of Wei Wuxian’s omissions. “Ah, probably for the best. I want you to myself a while longer.”

He said it like a dirty joke, and not the desperate plea it was, and so Lan Zhan flushed, and suspected nothing.

They snuck out of the banquet when the majority of the attendees were well on their way to sloshed and met Mianmian outside the guest rooms. She was alone, though Wei Wuxian had seen her taking her leave alongside Jin Zixuan and Jiang Yanli.

“Zixuan wanted to show Jiang-guniang the lotus pond he’s building for her,” She explained. “Seeing him tottering around covered in mud at the end of every day has been hilarious.”

“Aren’t you supposed to be protecting Jiang-guniang’s virtue?” He teased.

She snorted. “If anyone’s virtue is at risk, it’s Zixuan’s. By the way, tell Qing-jie that I love the new scabbard, and I can’t wait for the day I can use it.”

Associating herself with Yiling, apart from as Lan Zhan's friend — and supposed jilted paramour — was not to her advantage if she wanted to continue her spy work. And associate her with Yiling the scabbard would, for it was black leather, albeit with the tooled floral detailing in pinks and greens that were all Mianmian.

"Oh, good. She was nervous." For a Wen Qing value of nervous, which largely involved additional grumpiness and checking over his and Wen Ning's packing lists (minus the sex toys) until Wen Ning bundled her off with Wei Wuxian to spend an evening drinking at the teahouse where they'd become friends.

Mianmian grinned. "I *know* she told you not to tell me that."

"The purpose of friendship is to embarrass each other as much as possible." Wei Wuxian relayed this sage insight while gazing up at the stars overhead, with his hands on his hips.

Mianmian pursed her lips and shrugged. "True."

"Wen Qing will be happy to hear you liked it," Lan Wangji said. "I look forward to attending your wedding."

She glared at him — of course it was always better for a friend to be embarrassed than oneself. "Let's just go see if Jin-zongzhu left anything out for us to find."

"Other than the enormous pool of resentment under the tower?" He asked.

"Ugh," Mianmian said, beginning to lead them deeper into the maze of Koi Tower's buildings. "Why am I surprised?"

Mianmian led them right to Jin Guangshan's office. "Well. It's here today."

So she couldn't demonstrate the warping of space she'd described in her efforts to sneak inside.

"Maybe because so many guests are here? The thief could be lying low, especially if they aren't gentry."

"The thief hasn't been here since I visited you, I don't think," she said. "We haven't had any more disappearances among the servants — they started to make themselves unavailable for midnight deliveries even before then. The thief has probably been elsewhere."

"I imagine they were busy stalking me." Wei Wuxian said, and for a moment, he could smell the rotting beast again, see its mouths eating away at the wall in front of them, waiting to burst free.

"What happened?" He heard Mianmian ask, through a fog of memory.

"A monster broke through Yiling's wards that seems personally targeted to Wei Ying." Lan Zhan did not elaborate, thankfully.

"How is that possible?" Mianmian frowned.

Lan Zhan shook his head. “I don’t know.”

Guilt pierced Wei Wuxian’s heart, worse than ever.

How could he explain that he was increasingly certain the theft of the Yin Iron was his fault? Obliquely, but with a direct, traceable path back to a single one of his actions?

How could he explain the lengths Lan Zhan would have to go to achieve their goal of destroying it?

Lengths Lan Zhan would never choose if Wei Wuxian didn’t force him into it. But there was no one else who could, and Wei Wuxian had known it when they met.

Before they met.

Before he ever saved Lan Zhan in that cave.

He couldn’t lie to himself, not about him.

Shaking his head, Wei Wuxian forced himself back to the present. “I’m not the only demonic cultivator in the world. Just the only one not killing myself with it. Anyway, should we see if our esteemed Chief Cultivator left anything incriminating in here?”

Wei Wuxian reached out to the door, and pulled back just before his fingers would have brushed wood. He’d sensed the resentment-laden ward just in time to keep from setting it off. “It’s a good thing you never made it in here, Mianmian. This would have killed you if you entered uninvited.”

She gulped, but recovered quickly. “Can you get past it?”

“Not without dismantling it completely — and then of course they’d know it was me.” He paused, tilting his head. “Do we care?”

Lan Zhan’s lips pursed slightly as he considered.

Even after all Wei Wuxian had just reminded himself of, he still wanted to kiss him.

“Wait, someone’s coming.” Mianmian pulled them both back around the corner, and peaked out to catch a glimpse of whoever was approaching. “That’s Su She,” she whispered.

Lan Zhan wrinkled his lip at the name, so Wei Wuxian peaked around the corner to catch a glimpse. Jin Zixun was there, walking toward Jin Guangshan’s office with a very ordinary looking man. Su She had been among the disciples on the archery range, Wei Wuxian was fairly certain. But he would also definitely forget his face by morning at the latest.

“I can’t believe I’m getting sent to play messenger with *you* in the middle of the banquet,” Jin Zixun sneered. “I should be celebrating my uncle’s ascension with two girls in my lap and far more than the one measly jar of wine.”

“This is a far more important task than drunken debauchery, which you engage in daily. And after the fool you made of yourself, you’re lucky Jin-zongzhu trusts you with anything more important than cleaning the stables.” Su She put his hand on the door, and did not immediately shrivel into a dry husk. He had a token of passage on his person, then.

“I’m the Chief Cultivator’s nephew!” Jin Zixun whined. “That Xue guy thinks he can waltz in and out of here no problem, he can come pick it up himself.”

Lan Zhan gasped.

Su She made a shushing noise. “Don’t say his name. What if he hears you?”

He didn’t have time to dwell on the use of that name before the conversation continued.

“What’s he going to do? Murder the Chief Cultivator’s nephew? Besides, how would he know?”

“Ignore my warnings at your own peril.”

“When Bobo tires of your toadying and finds someone else to liaise with *him*, you’ll be sorry.”

“Sorry, what have you done for Zongzhu recently? Raised the dead? Weeded the petitions he views for him? No, you’ve, let’s see, antagonized his allies and brought his disciples on a personal excursion to... the beach.”

The door to the office shut behind them, cutting off their bickering.

Well, there was some information in that mess. This Su She was, as they’d suspected, a demonic cultivator.

And he was afraid of a man who had the run of Koi Tower.

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan said. “The name they said, Xue —”

“Strange, wasn’t it? I killed the last of the Xue line, so there shouldn’t be —” Wei Wuxian turned the corner, intending to inspect the wards more thoroughly, and walked into an unusually soft brick wall.

This was *not* the hallway they’d just been in. For starters, the wall was most definitely not a wall. It was Nie Mingjue’s enormous, muscled chest. And that hallway had not contained a sect leader and his aid.

Apparently, they got to experience the shifting halls of Koi Tower after all.

Wei Wuxian chuckled, and pushed himself back off of Nie Mingjue’s chest to bow. “Nie-zongzhu. Meng Yao.”

One of Meng Yao’s dimples escaped his control, distorting his mouth into a smirk.



Nie Mingjue directed his attention over Wei Wuxian's shoulder to his husband. "Wangji, I wanted a word with you. You're healthy? Content?"

People kept asking if Lan Zhan was okay like they thought Wei Wuxian married him just to hurt him.

Which uh — hurt him, no, definitely not, never. But they were right to be concerned.

He had no right to be angry.

Lan Zhan nodded, and while Nie Mingjue might have missed the blushing of his ears, Meng Yao didn't.

Satisfied with his response, Nie Mingjue turned to him. "Laozu. Huaisang seems to think you aren't the thief, though he won't tell me why. Or why he thought it was a good idea to run off on his own to meet you."

"He's correct, as I tried to explain the morning of the theft." Wei Wuxian said.

Lan Zhan stepped up to his elbow, warm and comforting against his side. "Every day the Yin Iron remains lost, it is a danger."

"Some might say it's a danger because it's *not* lost," Meng Yao pointed out.

"You've had unusual incursions in Qishan as well?" Wei Wuxian asked.

"Everyone has." Nie Mingjue said. "I was surprised Jin-zongzhu didn't bring it up to you at the banquet, when he has been sending missives speculating on your involvement to us for months."

"*Has* he now."

Nie Mingjue snorted roughly. "Most recently, we found a dying farmer with depleted qi but no injuries near our border with former Qishan, as close as Qinghe gets to Yiling."

Wei Wuxian produced Chenqing and twirled it between his fingers. It was a wonder few had realized that was a grounding gesture, and not one of arrogance. "It would be easy to blame me for that."

"You should not," Lan Zhan spoke up.

"Too easy," Meng Yao agreed.

"I cannot discount the possibility that it was you without evidence, you understand." Nie Mingjue said.

"I understand, Nie-zongzhu. And thank you." He bowed his head in genuine gratitude. This was one more sect leader than he'd expected to give him a chance. Nie Huaisang's influence, he assumed, and maybe Meng Yao's.

Finally, they were alone in their rooms, with little more information than they'd started out. Lan Zhan removed all but his inner robe, folding the layers more haphazardly than usual.

“What did you want to ask me, earlier in the woods?” Wei Wuxian swore to himself he would answer truthfully, whatever Lan Zhan's worries. It was well past time to stop putting this off. It could only be a worse betrayal, the longer he waited.

But Lan Zhan shook his head, giving him a reprieve he didn't deserve, and slipped into bed. “Nothing. It can wait.”

## Chapter End Notes

Jin Guangshan may be Chief Cultivator, but embarrassing turn out for the Crowd Hunt without his ~~best party planner~~ other son to do all the work

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 19

## Chapter Summary

Wangxian communicate well in bed, and not so well outside of it

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** Smut contains blindfolds, rimming, and wwx instructing lwj in how to fuck him, it goes from "I have just the thing for that." to "Wei Ying was nowhere to be found"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wen Qing finished taking the innkeeper's pulse and handed over the week's supply of his regular medicine. His thanks, as she refused to accept payment, already sat before her on the table: a meal of dumplings and greens stir-fried in garlic and chili, prepared using Wen-popo's recipes.

Wen-popo, still on Baoshan Sanren's mountain with A-Yuan and A-Xi, had passed the Dafan-style cooking down as best she could to a few interested and A-Ning, the only member of her remaining family capable of cooking.

Her patient gone, she turned to an unwelcome guest. "Go back to Qinghe and drink your brother out of house and home instead."

"But Si-Shu's wine is so much better," Nie Huaisang swirled the bottle of wine the innkeeper had provided for her and sipped directly from the lip. He hadn't so much as asked he leave before snatching it up when he arrived unexpectedly in the middle of her appointment. "Besides, I bring information. Reactions to Yiling Wei's appearance at the Crowd Hunt, that your people weren't in a position to see. You wouldn't deny me a drink in exchange, would you?"

Wen Qing signaled for a replacement bottle and said, shortly, "talk."

"The minor sect leaders have questions for Jin Guangshan about why his healers weren't able to treat the patients that were loaded off on you. What caused the destabilization? Should they be on the watch for relapses? And he doesn't have satisfactory answers for them. Wei-xiong did well." Nie Huaisang had made one aborted attempt to address him as Wei-dage, in deference to his age, and never again, out of fear of Lan Wangji's glare. "He also convinced half the cultivation world he's too busy fucking his husband to be plotting anything nefarious."

“He can multitask,” she grumbled.

“Rumor says Madame Jin caught them en flagrante, but unfortunately more reliable sources have informed me that was an exaggeration.” Nie Huaisang stared down into his wine mournfully.

“Spare me the details.”

She knew far too much about Wei Wuxian’s sex life already, simply from existing around him. She didn’t want verbal confirmation.

“Tragically, I don’t have them.” Nie Huaisang said. “But overall he came off unthreatening, concerned predominantly with his own affairs — and to Dage, as strange but well meaning.”

“Why are you telling me this, and not Wei Wuxian?”

“I’m a busy Huaisang, and I have a delivery for you.” Standing, he held out a small cloth bag of cream and gold, containing a rectangular box.

Inhaling sharply, she took it.

Nie Huaisang turned to leave.

“Wait,” she called after him, and when he turned back, pressed a cloth-wrapped belt ornament into his hand. A chain of cranes taking flight, carved from pink quartz. Innocuous enough she could wear it among the Jin, and all anyone might wonder was whether she had a serious admirer. “Can you get this to her for me?”

“Of course. I’m always happy to aid secret lovers.” He winked, and departed, whistling a popular folk song about star crossed lovers.

She grimaced at the choice, and took a sip from the fresh jar of wine a server brought her to steel herself before looking down at Mianmian’s gift. Another sip, and then a long swig, before opening it.

The contents of the box were glittering, deadly, and beautiful.

A new set of silver needles. Sharp and shining, ready to sink into a patient’s meridians to relieve pain, or to paralyze an attacker.

Mianmian did not need to court her in return. Wen Qing was the one who needed to make up for her actions. She was already seduced. Yet Mianmian had, choosing something simple, practical, that Wen Qing would cherish more than a thousand combs.

She tucked the box into her robes, close to her heart.

The name Xue dogged Lan Wangji’s thoughts incessantly after the Crowd Hunt. A memory hid just beneath the prevailing thoughts of Wei Ying, naked, with rope in hand and his daily

duties to the sect. He felt certain that memory held an answer that could shatter open everything they — or at least he — was missing.

He meant to bring it up with Wei Ying the night they returned home, along with Wei Ying's secrets, but the days events were long and grating. Lan Wangji had hoped he would avoid political maneuvering and expectations of small talk entirely, but a first question about life in the Burial Mounds was followed by another and he felt he could not refuse to answer without perpetuating misconceptions of Wei Ying's character. He spent hours crafting more words than he ordinarily spoke in a week.

By the time Wei Ying flung himself face-down onto their bed, on top of the sheet they'd never put away when they hurried out the door, and groaned, Lan Wangji wished the world would vanish from around him, leaving him floating in a sea of nothing but physical sensation. Closing his eyes, he sank to the floor and rested his forehead against Wei Ying's outstretched hand.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, rough day huh? What do you need?"

He shook his head into Wei Ying's palm.

"Oh, I see. Come here, I've got you, A-Zhan." Wei Ying had never called him that before. It sounded like — he couldn't even think the word, for fear of deceiving himself with false hope.

His eyes opened as Wei Ying started lifting him by the armpits, and flinched when candlelight assaulted his eyes. They scrunched closed and Wei Ying settled him on his knees on the bed.

"I have just the thing for that." Wei Ying efficiently shucked off his robes, and though Lan Wangji's eyes wanted to close, he forced them open more than once to appreciate the view. When he was fully bare, Wei Ying retrieved a black armband of densely woven silk from the pile of his discarded clothes. He rubbed the fabric between his fingers, considering. "If you don't want to talk much, how do you feel about moving? Could you fuck me?"

He nodded, an instinctive response. It was not so much that he did not want to talk, but that his throat felt tight, like the collar he still wore had been replaced with a padlock, though its control was somewhere in Wei Ying's bags. So long as he did not force out words, it would pass.

The second question was ridiculous. Of course he wanted to fuck Wei Ying. He always wanted Wei Ying, in whatever way Wei Ying would have him.

"Good. I've had a long day too. I'm tired. So Hanguang-jun is going to do exactly as I say tonight, and *I* am going to lie back and enjoy." The last thing Lan Wangji saw before the blindfold blocked his vision was his husband's smile. Perhaps he floated, now, in a darkness that would never lift. So long as Wei Ying whispered sweet commands, Lan Wangji was not certain he would care.

He was a coward, and here he could hide away from a truth that could cost him everything.

Lan Wangji was hard already, painfully so, just from the anticipation. Though he knew Wei Ying would not offer him relief any time soon.

The bed creaked as Wei Ying positioned himself on his back, framing Lan Wangji with his thighs. Wei Ying took his hand, guiding him along his thigh, and up to his belly. “Run your hands over my chest, both of them. Slower, take your time, I want you to feel every muscle, every rib, every deposit of fat in my sides.”

He traced his way up the expanse of Wei Ying’s torso, seeking out the sensitive places that made him shiver and groan. It felt different, like this, clumsy and new, even as he felt out familiar divots and scars. Alight with anticipation for his next instruction.

“Pinch my nipple between, your fingers, twist — ah! Good, like that. Now use your mouth.” His teeth closed over the tendon of Wei Ying’s neck and there was a sharp smack on his ass that left behind a fiery sting. “On my chest, you naughty boy, unless you *want* me to try out the new flogger.”

His throat had unlocked enough to force out a few words at a time. “You did not specify.”

“Be good, Hanguang-jun,” Wei Ying warned.

*What if I don’t want to?* He thought, and his expression must have shown on his face.

Wei Ying grabbed his jaw, yanking him so close he could taste Wei Ying’s breath, chili scented from dinner, on his face. It would sting his tongue if they kissed now. Lan Wangji strained against his grasp, trying to meet his lips, and only succeeded in making Wei Ying tighten his grasp, deepening the imprint of his fingers. “Is Hanguang-jun telling me he wants to disobey?”

He shrugged. If he’d noticed how much Wei Ying liked it when he pouted, made mistakes, delayed in doing as he was told, if sometimes the tantalizing ways Wei Ying might punish him if he touched himself without permission flashed through his mind, he didn’t know how to commit to the game. Too used to obeying without question, even now that he’d relaxed his dedication to the disciplines of Gusu Lan.

“Perhaps I could make you. Tell you how bad you are, that you need to be punished, and then when it’s over, tell you it doesn’t make a difference in how much I — want you. That being disobedient only makes you more beautiful. Would you want that?”

“So much, Wei Ying.” If Lan Wangji could learn to disobey for no reason other than that he wanted to, he could learn to be brave. To ask the difficult questions, with answers he did not want, but needed, nevertheless.

“Thank you for telling me, my Hanguang-jun.” Wei Ying caressed his jaw, fingers retreating. We’ll see what we can do about that. But not today. How can you learn to disobey if you think you’re supposed to?” Wei Ying tugged lightly on his collar, and the bed dipped as he lay back, shifting into a comfortable position. “Now put your mouth back to work. You don’t have to speak anymore.”

Relief washing over him, Lan Wangji dipped his head until his lips found skin, disguising his search for kisses until he caught one of Wei Ying's nipples between his teeth. Wei Ying arched beneath him. "Ah, keep going, suck on it, just like that, there's my good boy."

At the praise, Lan Wangji redoubled his efforts.

"With the way you're leaking all over me, it's like you're trying to produce all the lubricant I'll need." Wei Ying set his skin ablaze. He hadn't realized, and the thought of fingering him open with his own fluids only fanned the flames, though it wouldn't be enough. "But you'll keep a hold on yourself, won't you Hanguang-jun? You won't come until you've fucked me into tears, and you'll come inside me. On to the next one now."

"Hmm?" Lan Wangji hummed into his skin, and was rewarded with a strangled moan that turned into laughter. Answers were not forthcoming, so he did it again. What was the next one? He'd forgotten everything but Wei Ying's words.

When Wei Ying managed to collect himself, he pulled on Lan Wangji's hair, so his nipple slipped out with a wet pop. He wished he could see it, dark and swollen from his extended attention. "My other tit you ridiculous man, this one's had enough attention. Make it equal."

Oh. He could do that. He found it with his lips, and stopped only reluctantly when Wei Ying ordered him abruptly to sit back on his heels.

"You get to prepare me for your cock today, since you've been so good." Wei Ying pressed an open jar against his hand, keeping hold of it while Lan Wangji scooped out a generous portion to coat his fingers.

Reaching between Wei Ying's thighs, his knuckles grazed along his cock and balls as he found his way to the sphincter. He stroked around the ring's edge until the way was eased enough to let him in. He added a second finger after only a few pumps of the first, and rubbed circles over his prostate. Wei Ying went quiet, only the occasional punched out *ah* hinting at his enjoyment.

The feeling of Wei Ying clenching around his fingers, yet being unable to watch, made him strain for every sound, every rustle of the sheets. He felt set adrift without instruction, without his revealing expressions to counteract the unusual silence and did not realize he might be doing *too* good a job at foreplay until it was too late.

"Oh, oh fuck. *Fuck.*" Wei Ying's walls spasmed around him until his moans tapered off and he relaxed into the bed. It took Lan Wangji a moment to realize what had happened. "I wasn't expecting that. Do you feel what you've made me do?" Wei Ying guided his fingers through the cum pooling on his belly. "Now you have to work me up all over again."

Of course. Wei Ying gave him successive orgasms with a frequency the spring books indicated was uncommon. He should attempt to return the favor.

Lan Wangji trailed his fingers down, searching for cock, but Wei Ying grabbed his hand again. "Not like that — too oversensitive. Start with cleaning me up with your tongue."

Lan Wangji lowered his face to obey immediately, licking long stripes up Wei Ying's abs. They flexed under his tongue.

It wasn't long before Wei Ying stopped him. "Kiss me, I want to taste my —"

Lan Wangji surged forward to smash their lips together before Wei Ying could finish. Wei Ying kissed him back for one heady moment before his hand sank into Lan Wangji's hair and yanked, pulling him back. The throbbing of his cock intensified unbearably and he moaned, long and broken.

"Hanguang-jun is too eager. Sit back on your knees."

He did, his scalp still stinging. For a long moment, Wei Ying said nothing, keeping him in his dark limbo with blood rushing in his ears, his yet-untouched cock making itself known.

Wei Ying lifted a leg and set his heel on Lan Wangji's shoulder. "You're going to eat me out, but you're going to work up to it slowly. Show me you understand."

Lan Wangji kissed his ankle, just above the knobby bone, and trailed his way up his leg. At the side of the knee, he paused, taking his time to reverently suck a mark into the sensitive skin there. Wei Ying's leg twitched, involuntary, kicking against his back, and Lan Wangji had to grab hold to keep it from slipping off.

He hoped the mark would remain long enough for him to see it, once the blindfold came off. Lan Wangji redoubled his efforts to increase his chances. The careful, meticulous work, accompanied by the sounds of Wei Ying's sighs, the occasional hitches in his breath, were finally enough to send him under. The pucker of skin in the O of his mouth, between his teeth, the salty taste of skin, the relief that being filled with something of his husband always brought were the only things that mattered.

His nose bumping against the juncture of Wei Ying's thighs, against his balls, surprised him. Adjusting lower, he let his tongue flick out, testing and uncertain. The lubricant Wei Ying had handed him tasted like strawberries, but Lan Wangji found himself wishing he could taste Wei Ying himself.

He had never done this before. Fucked Wei Ying, yes, though not so actively within their games, where Wei Ying usually focused on picking apart all of Lan Wangji's self control, as outside them. But he'd never eaten his husband's ass, and could not see to know what he was doing.

Wei Ying's other leg wrapped loosely around the back of his neck, holding him in place, even as Lan Wangji lifted Wei Ying's hips off the sheets. The encouragement Lan Wangji needed to dive in without restraint, swiping his tongue across his perineum, delving within a hole already open for him. This time, Wei Ying made noises for him, stroking his ego with every satisfying vocalization. It was easy to lose himself in the motion, the way his nose nestled in beneath his balls, crushed against his perineum, the smell of Wei Ying, earthy and tinged with sweat engulfing him, his own body forgotten.



“Enough,” Wei Ying said, finally, unwrapping his leg to let Lan Wangji move back. He sat back a little dizzily, not entirely present in the best of ways. This time, when Wei Ying offered him the lubricant, he had to instruct Lan Wangji to coat his cock with it and guide him into position with hands as well as words. “All the way in with one thrust.”

He came very close to losing it, in that one thrust, whining against Wei Ying’s neck from the effort of holding back, determined not to get this wrong again. Wei Ying waited only until he had a thin grasp on himself to lock his ankles around the small of his back, demanding he move, to go harder, to *put his hips into it, damn it*, pressing kisses, some biting, some gentle, over Lan Wangji’s neck between words.

Wei Ying devolved, finally, into near wordless noises, his kisses sloppy and uncoordinated. Lan Wangji felt his hand slip between them as Wei Ying fisted his own cock. Still, he managed to gasp out, “I’m close. Come with me, Hanguang-jun, fuck me through it.”

Lan Wangji could only obey, his own orgasm set off even as Wei Ying gave the order, the tension in his body too high to wait for specifics. His elbows gave out, and he collapsed onto Wei Ying and stayed there as gentle hands began to comb through his hair.

Though he had nothing to compare but his own hand, no one could ever hope to measure up to Wei Ying.

“Fuck, is there water in the teapot?” Wei Ying asked some time later. “I don’t think I can get up for more. You fucked me so well I don’t think I can walk.”

Lan Wangji didn’t care about tea. He wasn’t moving from Wei Ying’s chest. “I was good?”

“You were so good,” Wei Ying whispered, swiping his thumb beneath one of Lan Zhan’s and then the other. He hadn’t realized he was crying. “The very best.”

He couldn’t embrace the praise, though he usually drank it in like parched soil, the memory of all he was avoiding beginning to creep back in despite the warm, safe, contentment he always found in Wei Ying’s arms.

“Ah, we’ll nap then. My Lan Zhan.”

His voice came from very far away, sleep sweeping in to carry Lan Wangji away, the possessive whisper of his name lost to wistful dreams.

Wei Ying was nowhere to be found, once again. Nor was Wen Qing. It was a few days after the Crowd Hunt, and Lan Wangji was determined not to lose his nerve once again.

Even if part of him was convinced insisting on the truth would cost him Wei Ying.

It made a morbid kind of sense that the day Lan Wangji finally summoned the necessary resolve was the day Wei Ying went where he could not follow once again. Or so it felt, with his recent insecurities at the forefront of his thoughts. He did not have a token of his own to reach Baoshan Sanren’s mountain. When they were staying in Wei Ying’s house on the

mountain before the completion of their rooms, Lan Wangji had depended on Wei Ying to take him back and forth. He didn't have enough of a need to make a portal of his own according to the rules that sheltered the mountain from outsiders, Lan Wangji had thought, presumed that was Wei Ying's reasoning as well — but now an illogical whisper said perhaps Wei Ying had not given him one by design.

Lan Wangji refused to give way before his fears. He did what he should have done weeks ago: talk to Wen Ning.

It was ridiculously easy to deceive him. Lan Wangji did not even have to lie.

“Wei Ying went back to the mountain, but I have an urgent missive for him,” Lan Wangji's words were the truth, but if Wen Ning had been able to read him as Wei Ying could, he would have seen the way his mouth tightened at the omission that Wei Ying had not told him of his absence. He had merely surmised it, based on the only past instances when Wei Ying left without informing his husband of his destination.

“Oh, I have a spare token,” Wen Ning said. “It doesn't work very well for me, because I'm so happy here, but you can borrow it if you like. Since Zongzhu is there, it may let you through.”

Wen Ning, innocent as he was, thought them merely a couple in love. He did not know that while Lan Wangji's heart had made a home in Wei Ying, the feeling was not mutual. That might make all the difference.

He avoided meeting anyone's eyes as he made his way to the ancient tree that lay just past the boundary of the Burial Mounds. It felt illicit, doing this without Wei Ying. A betrayal of trust. Yet had Wei Ying not betrayed his, in a way?

He pressed the token to old wood. The wind in its branches seemed to ask if he was certain. An unknowable energy, like Baoshan Sanren's and yet not, slipped into his meridians, testing his resolve. Lan Wangji held his breath and did not flinch.

That familiar, iridescent swirl of colors opened a hole in reality, granting him entry. He was met by a chill wind and unrelenting sun.

The portal had left him at the mountain peak. His lungs huffed out air for only a moment before adjusting, demonstrating how much progress he'd made in his efforts to become Wei Ying's match.

And now, he hovered on the verge of throwing it all away.

The first person he saw upon descending to the little mountain town was Min-qianbei, Wei Ying's shigu, watching A-Yuan as he played in the rabbit enclosure. A-Xi would be having calligraphy lessons with one of Wei Ying's shishus at this hour.

Lan Wangji paused a moment in the mountain's shadow to watch him, narrating a competition the rabbits did not know they were having — which rabbit would be crowned the best hopper? A-Yuan tried to persuade them to jump for their treats — to middling results, as

the rabbits refused to go one by one in an orderly fashion when carrot tops and blueberries were on offer.

Wei Ying had seemed so shocked when the Elder at the Crowd Hunt, Lan Mingjun, brought up children. What if he did not want children of his own, and Lan Wangji had merely assumed because of how good he was with them? He'd wanted this boy and his sister to be his since before he knew how he felt for Wei Ying. What if this was yet another way he had deceived himself?

*I want you to myself a while longer*, Wei Ying had said. Lan Wangji had had that thought precisely, but he couldn't be certain Wei Ying meant it in the same manner. They needed to be honest with one another, beyond their games, the all-consuming compatibility of their bodies, or they would never have the marriage he yearned for.

He walked on, steeling himself to break his own heart.

The door to Baoshan Sanren's cottage was not fully closed, and Wei Ying's voice carried out from it at his usual volume. They were not concerned about eavesdroppers, here.

"I need to tell Lan Zhan."

Lan Wangji froze at the sound of his name, positioned just out of view from the door.

"Are you certain that's the best idea?" Wen Qing asked.

"You two," Baoshan Sanren said with fond exasperation, "were supposed to learn from my mistakes with my Niangzi so long ago. Not replicate them."

"Waipo," Wei Ying whined — and almost immediately sobered with a dejected sigh. "I don't know how I can tell him. I've been lying to Lan Zhan for so long, won't he just walk away?"

"I can't answer that for you," Baoshan Sanren said. "I'm immortal, not omniscient."

"It sounds so easy. Tell him. Use my words. Tell him I've known all along how to destroy the Yin Iron. Save A-Ma." Wei Ying paused, and his last two, soft and watery words almost escape Lan Wangji's straining ears. "Lose him."

In this place, where Lan Wangji had first offered up his heart on a platter along with his hand in marriage, his heart plummeted, and shattered into pieces on the ground. His chest, his throat, his eyes burned with rage, with hurt, with unshed tears, he couldn't tell which. Perhaps with all of them.

Through the crack in the door, he saw Baoshan Sanren's arms, reaching out for Wei Ying. "Maybe you'll lose him, maybe you won't. The not knowing will always hang over your head until he has a chance to decide."

A sob escaped him.

"Is someone there?" Wen Qing asked.

Suddenly, he couldn't bear the thought of hearing the Yiling Laozu's excuses. Lan Wangji turned and fled, not looking back until he found a place, dark and familiar, where he could curl into a ball and cry. It was only when his tears ran out that he realized he had run to the home he'd shared for months with the man of bright laughter and dark shadows who swept him off his feet

The Yiling Laozu never came looking for him.

## Chapter End Notes

Wwx was having a breakdown on his grandma, so Wen Qing went to check, and when she didn't find anyone at the door and assumed one of BSSR's disciples thought better of knocking. Who else could possibly be on the mountain?

I'm sorry for the long delay! A while back I did a twitter poll on whether to wait until I had the angstiest part of this fic drafted to post more or not, and waiting won by a few votes. It's probably for the best, because life got busy again, I had a deadline to post my MDZS Two Cakes fic, and the next couple chapters are uh.... significantly longer than I thought they'd be. (Don't worry, they're not 20k -- the longest is 13k!)

If you don't like angsty cliffhangers, I'd recommend catching up when I post chapter 23. Otherwise, I hope you enjoy the ride!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 20

## Chapter Summary

Wen Ning accidentally delays an important conversation

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** Lan Wangji is sad and thinks he's been used :(

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian returned from Baoshan Sanren's mountain cried out and as ready to come clean as he would ever be.

There was a crowd of people milling around the courtyard when he and Wen Qing stepped through the newly constructed gates. Disciples reclined on the steps of their classroom at their leisure, though they should have been studying talismans in the afternoon. The construction workers, too, mingled in groups, talking in excited whispers. They weren't dressed for work, but in festival clothes. It wasn't a holiday, so maybe someone was getting married, and they'd forgotten to tell him.

The only people *not* present were Wen Ning, Lan Zhan, and the cooks, though the unmistakable scent of spices gave away the latter's location.

It didn't matter what everyone was up to. His husband was more important. "Has anyone seen Lan Zhan?"

An Yulun shot to her feet, wide eyed. "Wei-zongzhu! You're back early."

"Lan Zhan, my husband. About yay high, more beautiful than any divine being, goes by Hanguang-jun? Where is he?"

"I'm sorry, Zongzhu, I haven't seen him. Have you, Gao Luxiang?"

Gao Luxiang, a disciple with biceps the size of ripe watermelons, shook his head. "He was supposed to help me adjust the force of my strikes this afternoon, but I couldn't find him to cancel because of – you know."

Wei Wuxian did not know. "No one knows?"

One of the workers raised their hand. “Wen-gongzi said something about him going out? I thought he said to meet you.”

To meet him. Chills swept over him, leaving a tingling trail from his core to his fingertips. But no – Lan Zhan couldn’t have gone to the mountain, couldn’t have overheard. He didn’t have a token. An oversight Wei Wuxian was suddenly grateful for.

He had to tell Lan Zhan himself. It would be worse if Lan Zhan somehow found out on his own.

Lan Zhan must have gone to town, or for a walk. The worker had just misheard Wen Ning. “Where’s Wen Ning then?”

“Oh, he’s finishing something up for the Big Rev--” An Yulun clapped her hands over her mouth, as Gao Luxiang made an abortive slicing gesture across his neck.

“The Big Reveal?” Wen Qing asked warily, eyes narrowing until poor An Yulun gulped and looked anywhere but her eyes.

“I’m not supposed to tell you!” She mumbled through her fingers.

“Not supposed to tell us what?” Wei Wuxian stepped forward in a teasing threat, his curiosity piqued despite himself. “You wouldn’t keep secrets from your sect leader, now, would you?”

“Wei-zongzhu,” she pleaded. “It’s a surprise. I really can’t tell you.”

“Wen Ning manages these disciples for one day, and they have more loyalty to him than me.” As Wei Wuxian tsked, he spotted Wen Ning approaching out of the corner of his eye. “Suppose I can’t blame them. He *is* adorable.”

“*Wei-zongzhu*, that’s unnecessary.” Wen Ning protested, letting a few loose hairs fall in his face like they were a curtain to shield him from praise.

“I’ll say what’s necessary. Who said you got to be this cute *and* talented, huh? You built a beautiful compound that feels homey in less than six months. The other sect leaders shouldn’t be jealous of my power, they should be jealous because I have you.” Wei Wuxian patted him on the head, and he stared determinedly down at the ground.

“Wei-zongzhu,” Wen Ning complained.

“Because I have so many talented, hardworking disciples.” He caught sight of Lan Zhan approaching over Wen Ning’s bent head. “And the most clever, insightful, gorgeous husband anyone could wish for.”

“What is happening?” Lan Zhan asked.

“Did you not come back together?” Wen Ning asked.

Wei Wuxian looked at his husband, confused and got – nothing, in his expression. Nothing at all. There was a slight puffiness around his eyes, though it should have faded in the hours

since he cried the night before. He wanted to pull on Lan Zhan's ribbon, tease him with praises until he smiled.

But he could not take that liberty now.

Likely not ever again.

Wei Wuxian cleared his throat, trying to get rid of the sudden tightness. "Wen Ning here has a surprise for us. I *know* he finished the guest quarters last week, so it can't be that."

"The banquet hall this morning, as well, save the decorations the town carpenter will provide." Lan Zhan did not look at him as he spoke.

Had he found out somehow? Did he know?

Wei Wuxian swallowed down his fear and snapped his fingers. "The carpenter! He finished our thrones, didn't he? Do we get to see?"

"Not *just* the thrones." Wen Ning glared at the disciples for giving it away. "You'll get to see those tonight, during the celebration."

"What else, A-Ning? Don't keep me waiting." He reached out to shove Wen Ning by the shoulder.

Wen Ning tried to keep his lips sealed a bit longer, presumably to drive Wei Wuxian into doing flips off walls, but he was bursting with excitement and blurted out, "Would you like to see the secret tunnels? The first few, at least."

"Oh! You finished some already?"

Wen Ning bounced on his heels as he nodded.

Several hundred years ago, Baoshan Sanren had invented the Cave Maker, a device that crumbled rock to gravel to build her library, though it had gone through a number of improvements as the library expanded over the centuries. Wei Wuxian had tampered with it a few years earlier after he had an idle thought about using it to tunnel into Nightless City. Ultimately, he discarded the idea – tunneling blind into a volcano in a process that would take several months would only be a reckless waste of time.

Now, though, it let Wen Ning do in months what should have taken years, dissolving the mountain's rock and shoveling out what remained alongside the team of townspeople who now gathered around them.

"There are a few surprises *someone* hasn't managed to spoil in there." An Yulun used Gao Luxiang as a human shield against Wen Ning's words. "Because the disciples haven't seen them yet either. You can all see them together now."

The townspeople who assisted with the excavations nodded with barely suppressed glee, shouting out jumbled hopes that Laozu and Hanguang-jun would love their creation.

“Follow me, please,” Wen Ning started toward the face of the Burial Mounds, the disciples trailing after, chattering amongst themselves.

Lan Zhan swept past him without a backward glance, catching up with Wen Ning as he stepped through a patch of stone that was now only illusion. It seemed Wei Wuxian had terrible timing in getting up his courage.

Wei Wuxian looked at Wen Qing for support, and she shrugged. “There will be time to break your husband’s heart after we celebrate my brother’s achievements.”

“Thanks, you’re the best,” he said flatly.

“I know.” She led the way inside.

The tunnel was lit by torches that flickered to life as Wen Ning strode forward, guttering out as Wei Wuxian passed, last in line. Aside from the presence of the others, that the darkness around him was merely that and not tens of thousands of hungry ghosts, it was like stepping back into the Burial Mounds of ten years ago.

When he was just a boy who wanted to save his grandmother, in deep over his head.

Wen Ning turned a corner, ahead, and they were in a large space, lit by more torches that flickered on one by one. Waist high benches formed a horseshoe shape around the floor, and there were shelves built into the walls.

“What’s all this?” He asked, as Wen Ning turned back toward him, somehow even more excited than before.

“It’s a workshop! So you can invent things without worrying about waking anyone with explosions.” Wen Ning beamed, the firelight casting deep, grooved shadows across his face.

“Thank you!” It was incredibly sweet of Wen Ning to do this for him, but he’d have to replace the lighting with something less flammable, figure out how to clear the air when he did inevitably blow things up, and get over the low-grade panic the space instilled in him.

He scrounged up some more effusive words of thanks from somewhere and gave Wen Ning another pat on the head. It wasn’t Wen Ning’s fault Wei Wuxian had hang-ups. He’d hate to be a reminder of anything that brought Wei Wuxian pain, no matter how much he deserved it.

Wen Ning led them onward, stopping a second time at a room with three pools of water with benches ringing the edges. The glare of the torches lent them a reddish cast, though he was fairly certain, from the scent of wet rock absent an overwhelming sharp copper, that they were not, actually, tainted with blood.

“The underground stream fills the pools here. The water is warmed as it enters by a talisman carved into the pipes, and its replaced regularly by the current.” Wen Ning explained, “So everyone can bathe here, instead of having to fill and empty their own tub.”

Gao Luxiang whooped and, picking up a protesting Cai Baochang, a tiny former rogue cultivator, jumped into one of the pools. The other disciples joined in, fully dressed.



“Oh dear,” Wen Ning sighed.

“Let them roughhouse,” Wei Wuxian said. “Unless we need to get back now?”

Wen Ning shook his head. “No, the cooks said not to be back for another hour.”

Lan Zhan watched the disciples at play, giving no sign he’d heard them.

Wei Wuxian bit his lip and feigned an upbeat mood for Wen Ning’s benefit. This was his accomplishment, and Wei Wuxian would not ruin it. To Wen Qing, he said. “Reminds me of how we met, finding you skulking around near the blood pool in the shadows.”

She groaned. “Don’t remind me. I can’t believe I let you convince me anyone save the Yiling Laozu would have been wandering around the Burial Mounds.”

“But that’s exactly what you were doing, so it made just enough sense to dupe you for a few hours.” He didn’t have to be a particularly good actor to persuade her. In his experience, people rarely looked past their assumptions – as Wen Qing confirmed a moment later.

“In my defense, I was expecting someone much older and visibly demonic, not a friendly shop cat in human form metaphorically twining around my ankles.”

He clutched a hand to his heart. “Aww, Wen Qing, I think that’s the nicest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“Of course, you were hiding your demonic nature under the surface.” She elbowed him in the gut, and he shoved her back.

“You met in the Burial Mounds?” Lan Zhan asked – and he looked at Wei Wuxian for the first time that day. Wei Wuxian’s heart skipped a beat, and sped up.

“Oh, we’ve never told you the full story, have we?”

“Will you?” Lan Zhan asked, like he wasn’t certain.

“I don’t think *I’ve* heard the whole thing,” Wen Ning said – and he was the reason Wei Wuxian couldn’t draw Lan Zhan out into the dark now in private to make his confession.

But still, Wei Wuxian only had eyes for his husband. Finally, Lan Zhan was looking at him, and Wei Wuxian would do anything if Lan Zhan would only continue. “If you want! Let me know if I’m boring you.”

Lan Zhan rolled his eyes – and then that brief spark of emotion was gone. Only polite interest remained as Wei Wuxian tried to demonstrate his willingness to give him everything.

Wen Qing was not the first cultivator Wei Wuxian fooled with his innocent act, and she wouldn’t be the last. She was, however, the only the one who earned the truth.

Wei Wuxian happened to be visiting town, discussing the logistics of what would become the town orphanage with the childless couples interested in running it, when she rode into town on her sword. Wei Wuxian watched from a second-floor window, hidden from view by the angle.

Wen Qing hid her gawking at the liveliness of the town around her better than most, and she was more polite in her responses to the townspeople's refusals to tell her the Yiling Laozu's location. From her robes and bearing, the ornate guan of flames on her head, and her utter lack of reaction when a fierce corpse carrying a basket of cabbage passed her on the street, her identity was obvious. Yet, she treated his people with respect.

It was for that reason that when she headed up the path toward the Burial Mounds, he decided to test her.

Setting the gap-toothed toddler he'd been holding on his hip on the ground, Wei Wuxian told the couples to spread word that he was not to be called by title if he returned to town with a guest. Though he hadn't bothered to do more than mess with any visitors from the cultivation sects with contradictory tall tales about himself since Jiang Fengmian, who hid his spinelessness behind a good reputation, they didn't blink at the request. Even when he asked for a spare purple outer robe.

They were accepting of his eccentricities in Yiling, even from the beginning. Whether because they thought him an immortal worthy of veneration, or because they had seen too much to blink at a bit of unconventional spontaneity and a few resurrected loved ones, he wasn't entirely certain.

Wei Wuxian trailed Wen Qing up the path, pausing when she stopped to inspect the embarrassing shrine the villagers had built for him. They *still* carried offerings to it, no matter how hard he grumbled.

*But Laozu, how better to keep Yiling safe than if the sects think you our divine protector?* The town magistrate, and the merchants, and even the farmers argued to his dismay.

Of course, it was only the people of Yiling who believed him divine rather than demonic. But there was nothing he could say to dissuade them. So when the offerings were fresh, he sometimes took an apple – they were meant for him, after all. The rest could go to the creatures of the forest, who were slowly, cautiously returning to a land still recovering from centuries of pollution.

Straightening from the shrine, Wen Qing scoffed, and moved on. It was his first clue that she might be someone he could like.

She stopped again on her way when a family of weasels scurried away at the sound of her approach to peer at the log of fossilized wood, hollow at one end, where they had made their nest. Again when a swallowtail butterfly with brown and yellow striped wings landed on a nearby fern.

Unexpected, that a cultivator on a mission ordered by Wen Ruohan, would take the time to stop and indulge in what looked to him very much like curiosity.

At the tree with deep roots, Wen Qing turned, and he could see the hesitation in her profile – once he ducked out of her line of sight, flattening himself against the slope, that was. She was not, despite earlier appearances, entirely without fear. Yet she had no choice, and so continued on.

Wei Wuxian did not immediately follow once she entered the caves themselves, giving her time to take in the single chamber of the Demon Summoning Palace that Xue Chonghai had completed with the labor of the undead before his death, and then to enter the undeveloped cave where he'd slept amongst nightmares, learning the shape of the past and the future, for a goal that had felt so much more *possible* when he was fifteen and convinced he was invincible.

When enough time had passed that his arrival *might* be coincidence, Wei Wuxian walked inside the cave, whistling a random ditty.

He found Wen Qing pinching the bridge of her nose, staring at the blood pool, the last remaining remnant of the hell the Burial Mounds had been for centuries. She startled at his whistling, echoing off the cave walls.

A single silver needle flew from her fingers and came to a rest at the hollow of his throat, vibrating at a high, buzzing frequency.

“Whoa, Guniang!” Wei Wuxian held up his hands and stepped back. The needle followed him, pricking at his skin. “The Yiling Laozu wouldn’t happen to secretly be a lovely young lady, would they?”

“No.” Wen Qing did not let down her guard at his demeanor, even slightly. Smart of her, if inconvenient.

“Well, so much for that.” He grumbled, flicking his nose.

“You’re oddly at ease with the threat of death,” she said.

“Not much I can do about it, can I? You got the drop on me. Either you kill me, or you don’t. If I die here, maybe I’ll come back as something interesting.” He was never actually in danger. The needle couldn’t do much damage, even if she sent it piercing through his throat – he healed fast enough to patch a needle-sized hole in his larynx before asphyxiating – but that didn’t mean he liked it. Unfortunately, though it would be child’s play to snatch it away with a coil of resentment, he wanted her to think him a harmless fool. “Though it *would* be disappointing. I like being alive.”

“If you want to continue being alive, why are you here?” Wen Qing demanded.

“I’m looking for the Yiling Laozu too, of course, why else would I be here?”

“Why?” She squinted at him suspiciously.

“I want him to train me!” Acting the fool wasn’t how he’d get her to let down her guard, but her grimace *was* interesting. A niece of Wen Ruohan’s dedicated to his cause should have

taken the opportunity to see if he was a demonic cultivator worth recruiting, but all her expression showed was distaste and doubt. “You’re *positive* there’s no one else here?”

“I haven’t discounted the possibility that a mysterious being who cleansed the Burial Mounds is capable of invisibility.” Wen Qing glanced into the shadows like there might be someone hiding there. And if she’d been someone less intriguing, there might have been.

Wei Wuxian threw back his head and laughed despite the pricking at the hollow of his throat. He really should get around to figuring out invisibility in light someday, rather than merely wrapping himself in shadows of resentment. Something about the way light reflected off skin made it tricky – a solution would require really sitting down and focusing.

Another item for the list for *after* he saved A-Ma, if he remembered long enough to jot it down.

Feigning disappointment, Wei Wuxian kicked a pebble at the wall, careful not to let the needle break skin. “If he is, we’re not going to find him on our own.”

“You really want to be a demonic cultivator’s disciple?”

So Wen Qing hadn’t bought it.

“Why else would I be here?” The best way to trick someone was to let them figure out the story you wanted them to believe for themselves. A-Ma had once led Wei Wuxian to talk himself out of having a second serving of dessert, and the lesson stuck with him ever since.

“To investigate for your sect leader,” she said. “You’re too finely dressed to be an ordinary rogue. In Jiang colors.”

“You got me.” Wei Wuxian let his grin go lopsided, sheepish. “I’m here on behalf of Sect Leader Jiang, he thought pretending to want to learn from the dark overlord might give one of his disciples a better chance at finding him. But I’m not seeing dark much of anything save the oncoming nightfall. And you? What sect sent you?”

She knew he knew from the color of her robes, of course. But they were openly taking each other’s measure now, though he wasn’t sure what she wanted his for.

“Wen Ruohan.”

“Scary!” He clapped his hands together. “Want to get a drink? Searching here clearly isn’t getting us anywhere. Maybe he’ll show his face in town.”

Wen Qing studied his face for another long moment, before finally, the needle dropped from his throat. His sigh and slump of relief were only slightly exaggerated. “Worth a try, before I have to head back empty handed.”

“Wen-zhonghu won’t react well?” Wei Wuxian clasped his elbows behind his back as he fell into step beside her on the way out of the cave.

“Wen-zongzhu doesn’t react well if his tea cooled while he was talking.”

Ah, grumpy people had the best sense of humor. Though he suspected her words held more than a grain of truth.

“Jiang-zongzhu wouldn’t notice his disciples parading naked in front of him.” Literally – rumor said Jiang Fengmian was entirely oblivious to his disciples’ tradition of skinny dipping in broad daylight upon reaching their majority. Despite the heckling crowds the tradition attracted. “Mix them together and maybe you’d get a sect leader worth following. Unless you’re a diehard believer in Wen superiority, in which case please forget I said that!”

“Wen superiority? You only have to take one look at Wen Chao to know there’s no such thing.” She laughed bitterly.

His sympathetic wince was no pretense. “I think you need that drink much more than I do.”

The teahouse was bustling, filled almost to the brim with townspeople waiting to see what he’d do. There was, in fact, one open table left for two, intentionally reserved on the second-floor balcony where they would have the illusion of privacy.

A group of four men sat at the table closest to the stairs, two of them playing weiqi, though only three were drinking. The fourth wasn’t capable of it anymore. The old carpenter of Yiling, Wei Wuxian’s very first soul-bound fierce corpse, turned around.

To Wen Qing’s credit, she didn’t flinch at the sight of the dark veins running up the old carpenter’s neck, though she did startle when he spoke to her. Wen Ruohan could force dead bodies to move and seize control of the living, but he couldn’t invite a soul back into its body and anchor it there as long as they wished.

“No luck with Laozu, huh? He’s a mercurial one, don’t take it to heart.” Not so subtly, the old carpenter winked at Wei Wuxian over her shoulder.

Fortunately, Wen Qing was taken aback enough by the sight of a sentient fierce corpse winking that she assumed it was at her. “Thank you, Yeye, for your advice.”

“Yeye! I’m not as old as all that, am I?” The carpenter turned back to his companions, indignant. But they were quick to inform him that he was, indeed, as old as all that, giving Wei Wuxian the chance to escape the risk of early discovery by slipping upstairs to their table.

Wen Qing followed after a moment’s hesitation, in which she presumably determined it would be impolite to ask the old carpenter if she could study him.

The teahouse’s owner was a better actor. While she took it upon herself to wait on them personally – which she decidedly did *not* do on a daily basis, not even for him anymore – she played it off as the novelty of having not one, but *two* cultivators visiting.

“And from Great Sects, too! You simply must try Laozu’s favorite noodle soup with your wine, I insist.”

She'd driven off more than one cultivator with that broth.

"Well, if it's the Yiling Laozu's favorite!" Wei Wuxian cried. "We'll have two."

Wen Qing shrugged in acquiescence.

"Madame, are you certain you haven't seen the Yiling Laozu?" He asked, the picture of innocent curiosity.

"What kind of a citizen of Yiling would I be if I told a stranger that? If you want his attention, earn it." The innkeeper stormed off in a huff. Sometimes, she acted in shows for the community's festivals, but in another life, she might have been a travelling theater troupe.

"If I've learned anything today, it's that the Yiling Laozu really is capable of miracles," Wen Qing mused. "That man downstairs..."

"The fierce corpse?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Isn't he, you know, an affront to nature?"

She shrugged. "What's an affront to nature when there's something to be learned?"

"Shhh, don't say that, the Lan Sect might hear you!" Wei Wuxian fake whispered.

Wen Qing covered a surprised laugh by choking on her own spit.

The drinks came out with the soups. Wei Wuxian poured Wen Qing a cup of wine first, then himself. "Cheers to useless endeavors?"

She sniffed the wine before answering and decided it would do the job. Clinking her cup against his, she tossed back the cup, and immediately poured herself another. And drank that too.

He wouldn't even have to try to get her into a sharing state of mind. At this rate, she'd get there on her own in no time. "I imagine you don't get much time to indulge in Nightless City."

"Stupid questions don't deserve answers." She tilted her head back and drank, letting out a sigh of satisfaction, though she couldn't be tasting anything, but the tingling burn the wine left in its wake.

"If we're being pedantic, that was speculation, not a question."

"If we're being pedantic, you were prying."

"Guilty." Wei Wuxian drank directly from the jar, licking a stray droplet from the corner of his mouth. Wine just tasted better that way, with the added kick of something illicit. "We shouldn't let our noodles get cold."

He fished some out with his chopsticks and couldn't help closing his eyes as he slurped them up. Perfection.

“A little hotter than my taste, but it’ll do.” Wen Qing said, and his eyes popped open.

Belatedly realizing his enjoyment of what the people of Yiling had dubbed Laozu’s Hell Soup might be a giveaway, Wei Wuxian fanned his mouth while crying, “owowowooooow,” and downed his first jar of wine in a few gulps.

Impressive that Wen Qing could take the heat, though she drank a little faster than was strictly wise to counteract it.

He stared mournfully into his soup for a moment, before deciding it would be more fun to keep making a fuss than to waste it.

Wen Qing paused with a mouthful of noodles halfway to her mouth. “Why are you still eating that if it’s making you cry?”

He shrugged, mumbling around a bite of noodles. “I’m hungry.”

“You could order something else.”

“Do I look like I’m made of money?” His borrowed, Jiang-esque robe was of an ordinary make, nowhere near as stylish or ornamented as his usual garb. “Besides, I think my mouth is going numb now. My tongue has passed on, leaving me behind without a sense of taste.”

Wen Qing did not miss a beat. “You were already missing that.”

He very narrowly avoided snorting soup through his nostrils. “Ouch! Your words burn more than the soup, Wen-guniang!”

She sighed dramatically. “If only your tongue had taken your ability to talk with it.”

“Oh, she goes in for the kill! And here I thought we were becoming friends.”

The woman who’d held him at needlepoint only a short time earlier stared morosely into her wine. “Wens don’t have friends.”

That was... absolutely tragic. “Well, this Wen has one now.”

She pulled a disgusted face, but let him refill her cup.

They ate, and drank, and Wen Qing rapidly passed tipsy. Wei Wuxian forgot to keep grimacing at his noodles toward the end of his bowl, but she didn’t seem to notice as their conversation turned to the sort of confidences only made several jars in past midnight.

“I volunteered to come here, you know.” A truth, though not the way Wen Qing would take it.

She screwed up her face to drunkenly judge him. “You have a death wish, don’t you?”

“You’re not the first to accuse me of that, but no. The truth is, I’m worried about my A-Ma.” His throat choked up with genuine emotion though the tale he spun was only loosely based in

reality. “I hoped I might find something to help her in the Burial Mounds. She was cursed a few years ago, you see, and the curse was broken, but something... lingered. She was always a strong cultivator, she should have decades left in her, at least! But now she’s like a ghost of herself, and it’s only getting worse.”

Wen Qing patted his hand clumsily.

“You’re a doctor, do you know what’s wrong?” He pouted, pleading.

“I couldn’t tell without meeting her, and if I don’t return when my uncle expects, he’ll --” Her gaze sharpened. “How did you know I’m a doctor?”

Ah. Fuck.

Fortunately, she’d handed him an explanation.

“There’s only one Wen who wields silver needles over a sword. And you just admitted Wen Ruohan is your uncle.”

“Oh.” She pouted grumpily, dropping her chin onto her fist. “Oops?”

“What will he do if you don’t come back in time?” He prodded.

“Torture my brother, of course.” She slurred, matter of fact. “Maybe kill one of my people, if he feels like it.”

“That doesn’t seem like someone I’d want to follow.”

“He might as well have murdered my parents. But he has my brother, and knows where everything that’s left of my family lives. A-Ning is a baby, he doesn’t deserve any of this. Not like I do. But Wen Ruohan knows how to control me, and that I wouldn’t have much reason not to become a kinslayer if it weren’t for his safety.” Wen Qing shook her head. “Everyone says Wen Ruohan was a great man once. Now, he’s nothing but a hunger for power.”

“What does Wen Ruohan want from the Yiling Laozu then?” Wei Wuxian asked. “An... alliance? Against the other sects?”

“To know if he’s a threat to his campaign. If he’ll stand aside or, or,” She gestured wildly with her cup, sloshing half its contents onto the table. “If he’s as powerful as they say.”

Wei Wuxian scrambled to place a cloth over the spill. “Drawn any conclusions?”

Wen Qing stared at the stars for long enough he thought her sleeping with her eyes open. “I walked out of the Burial Mounds alive. He’s powerful. But the people here seem content. Not fearful. Not like Nightless City.”

The last was a whisper, full of dread.



It wasn't as though the thought of recruiting Wen Qing hadn't crossed his mind before. The benefits of having a doctor of her renown looking over A-Ma weren't a new idea – once, at his lowest, he'd entertained thoughts of kidnapping her out from under Wen Ruohan's nose. Her appearance in Yiling felt like fate. But until she judged his work and found hope in it despite the blasphemy of his methods, he hadn't thought he might succeed.

Glancing at her, he saw her eyelids drift closed. They fluttered, but remained closed. Wen Qing had fallen asleep propped up on her hand.

In the morning, then.

Wen Qing woke the next morning with the end of a bone flute digging into her cheek.

“Wakey, wakey,” Wei Wuxian said in a sing-song voice. One of the benefits of being near immortal was throwing off hangovers with ease. Wen Qing, though an unusually strong cultivator who could likely stretch her years for as long as she wished, if she chose to make the effort, did not have that advantage.

“Wha...?” She groaned as she stirred, batting at Chenqing one-handed while she tried to rub both eyes at once with the other. When she saw him, in his dark robes, his eyes red thanks to the coil of resentment he wore as an accessory, the infamous flute pointed at her, Wen Qing stumbled to her feet, instantly wide awake. “You’re not a Jiang disciple.”

“Guilty.” Wei Wuxian twirled Chenqing through his fingers and let the bone flute vanish back into the shadows where it dwelled when he had no need of it. “But I do have a hangover cure and an offer you can’t refuse.”

“I’m a doctor, I can cure my own hangover.” As she spoke, Wen Qing pulled her qiankun bag out of her sleeve, rummaging through it to ensure everything was there. Already, she seemed more alert. “And I think you’ll find I’m very good at refusing offers.”

“If I had nefarious intentions, I wouldn’t have carried you to your own private bedroom in an inn.” Seriously. She’d handed him so many opportunities to take her out. She accused him of having a death wish, but it seemed like she was just hoping something would do her in.

Shaking her head, she stepped around him. “I can’t help you, even if I wanted to. I’m as much my uncle’s loyal dog as the Core-Melting Hand.”

“Ah, that’s where you’re wrong. We can help each other.” Wei Wuxian skirted around her to block her path to the door. “What if I said I can ensure your family’s safety? No matter who wins the oncoming war.”

Wen Qing hesitated, for just a moment, before she rolled her eyes. “I’d say that’s bullshit. But you have until I’m done eating breakfast to convince me.”

Wei Wuxian grinned, stepping aside to wave her through. “Not many cultivators would dare to speak to the Yiling Laozu the way you do.”

“Compared to Wen Ruohan, you’re about as intimidating as a newborn kitten.”

“Am I?” He sent a bit of resentment to slam the door shut behind her, making her jump. And jump again at the renewed red tinge of his eyes. “I’d say it’s all in the presentation. Just in case you were getting ideas about telling your uncle to whom you’re oh-so-loyal that Yiling’s ripe for the conquering.”

“I saw the cleansed Burial Mounds, there’s no need to be dramatic.” Startling Wen Qing wasn’t enough to intimidate her, and he respected her all the more for it.

“Ah, Wen Qing, I like you.”

“There’s something deeply wrong with you,” Wen Qing called over her shoulder, preceding him down the stairs. Breakfast was waiting for them in the inn’s main room. Their choice of tofu pudding, tea eggs, and scallion crepes, along with the tea the inn’s cook swore by for hangovers.

“I’m rather fond of grumps,” Wei Wuxian said, settling in across from her. “You say the most cutting things and need to be bullied into accepting affection. Makes for an excellent drinking partner.”

“More like a babysitter.”

He laughed, though he’d been the one picking her up off the floor the night before. “See? Cutting.”

“The sun’s getting higher in the sky and I’m not hearing anything convincing.”

“Ugh, fine.” Wei Wuxian got to the point. “I want you to help me find the Yin Iron.”

“From serving one man obsessed with that manifestation of destruction to another? No.” She started to stand.

“So I can destroy it.” He clarified.

That made her jaw click shut. She sat back down, hard.

“My A-Ma really is ill, that was the truth. And the Yin Iron is the cause. To heal her, I need to destroy it.” Wei Wuxian didn’t owe her an explanation. It would be years before he told her the whole truth. But Wen Qing understood the value of secrets better than he did, the importance of trusting only a few, and so she understood. “In return, your family’s safety, helping to save the lives of a lot of people, and probably your uncle’s death along the way. And you won’t even have to do it yourself.”

“I said far too much last night,” Wen Qing groaned.

“Sometimes everyone needs a confidant, and it sounds like you’ve gone far too long without.” Wei Wuxian hadn’t had a friend close to his own age since Xiao Xingchen left the mountain. He’d never had a friend so acerbic, so intellectually curious – until Wen Qing, the only people who understood his inventions had been his grandmothers. He wouldn’t find a

more perfect match until he met his husband, at the same time as Wen Qing met the love of her life.

With Wen Qing's help, he thought then, there might be a chance of success.

"You can really hide my family away? Somewhere my uncle can never find them?" *You have that power?* She didn't add.

"One night of drinking isn't enough to entrust you with the location, you understand—" She did, nodding "—But yes, somewhere not even Wen Ruohan could know to look for."

"If it means I can see them safe, you can blindfold me the whole way there," Wen Qing vowed.

That wasn't necessary, with his abilities. Most would say that what he asked of her was far more terrible, but Wen Qing agreed without flinching.

Wen Qing allowed him to carry her through the space between life and death to Dafan Mountain. Those that remained in her town were distant relatives, non-cultivators, and Wen Qing the heir to a decimated branch clan. So it took only a few words from her for Wenpopo, still an elderly living woman then rather than an undead one, to start directing everyone's packing.

A-Xi went with her extended family to Baoshan Sanren's mountain then, but A-Yuan had not yet been born. Their parents were the Dafan Wen's only remaining cultivators, other than Wen Qing, and so tended to the Wen army. Their assignments kept them as far from the Wen siblings as possible.

Wen Qing would see her cousin's wife only once more, when she knocked on her door in the night with a fussy bundle in her arms and begged her to take A-Yuan where she'd taken his older sister. She refused to leave without her husband though she had not seen him herself in months.

"What do I tell Wen Ruohan about you?" Wen Qing asked as they watched his A-Ma introduce A-Xi to the bunnies. "If I tell him I couldn't find you, it won't be me that suffers."

Her brother. Young and innocent and any villain's ideal target.

"Tell him the truth, or part of it. I *am* trouble. He should hope he doesn't attract my attention." Wei Wuxian wiggled his eyebrows, a very intimidating motion.

"I'll tell him you're powerful, but self-absorbed and insular. That Yiling's halfway to disappearing off the map as it becomes your domain." Wen Qing decided. "Like Baoshan Sanren, but a tyrant with little imagination."

Her use of his Waipo's title startled him. He hadn't mentioned her yet as anything other than his grandmother or introduced them. But Wen Qing would inform him years later that she had already suspected. "You want to make me out to be an evil immortal?"

“He’ll be inclined to believe it. That’s what the rumors already say,” Wen Qing explained. “You can even act the part, so long as you refrain from flirting. And no one puts a child in front of you or sees you attempt to wrangle a donkey.”

“Those are quite the caveats.” Fair caveats, but damn. Wen Qing did not pull her punches. And it wasn’t *his* fault donkeys were uncooperative creatures. The flirting was a little bit his fault though. “But fine, it’s not like I’m trying to make a place for myself in the Cultivation World. What does it matter if you reinforce the rumors?”

*That*, of course, was a decision that would come back to bite them both in the ass.

Wen Ning left Nightless City the same night Wen Qing returned. His absence wasn’t noted, not then. Wen Qing went out of her way to obey Wen Ruohan’s every order to the letter, until the day he sent her to the lectures at the Cloud Recesses, and she vanished along the way.

Lan Wangji did not know what made him ask about Wei Wuxian’s past with Wen Qing, of all things, when all he wanted to do was scream, the echoes of his voice off the arched ceiling magnifying and reflecting his pain to a degree he wasn’t built to express.

No, that wasn’t true. He knew exactly what made him ask. Because despite everything he had learned, despite the newfound knowledge of his husband’s lies digging into his chest, he still craved every scrap Wei Wuxian deigned to offer him.

“Jiejie, why do you never talk about how difficult it was to work for Wen Ruohan?” Wen Ning asked when Wei Wuxian finally stopped talking. Though his husband’s voice was as beautiful as ever, the sound was now a self-inflicted cruelty.

Lan Wangji’s heart had yet to accept what his mind knew. That this marriage had never been, and never could be, what he’d hoped it would. The shock of all Wei Wuxian had left out for him to find in a place they had once shared was still too fresh.

*Wen Qing understood the value of secrets, Wei Ying said. The importance of trusting only a few.*

He’d certainly kept his secrets.

Even secrets Lan Wangji had a right to know.

It was the lack of trust that hurt the most, when Lan Wangji had given him no reason to doubt.

*Earlier that Day, on Baoshan Sanren’s Mountain*

Lan Wangji did not know how many hours passed before he stopped bursting into a fresh wave of sobs every time Wei Wuxian’s admission echoed through his mind. But finally, he uncurled from a ball on the floor, and looked around.

The little house on Baoshan Sanren's mountain held a scant few of Lan Wangji's belongings. A belt, with ornaments still dangling from it. A book he'd finished and not yet returned to the mountain library. Spare guqin strings hanging from a hook below one of his husband's decorative knots, missed in the packing.

But Wei Wuxian's presence was still felt, and not just the ghost of the years he had lived there. Books and papers were spread across the desk, a board with some of Wei Ying's habitual decorative knotting pegged to a board and left half-finished on the chair. His husband had worked here recently, though Lan Wangji knew he now handled all sect-related paperwork at the Burial Mounds compound.

It was not his place to look, to steal more secrets out from under Wei Ying's nose. Yet here, he might find answers, if not from Wei Ying's mouth.

Anxious about Lan Wangji's response or not, there had been plenty of opportunities for Wei Ying to tell him. Months.

Lan Wangji had married him thinking his husband's secrets only encompassed his past, not the goal they shared. He had expected them to search out a solution together and gotten so caught up in playacting at love it had taken him far too long to notice something was wrong.

If Wei Ying walked through the door right that moment, would he stand his ground or jump into his arms like a lovesick fool? He could not be certain he wouldn't melt at the sight of his smile.

He stepped toward the desk feeling like the tether connecting his soul to his body had been cut down to a thread.

Wei Ying's papers were a mess with no conceivable method of organization. Cultivation texts lay on top of spring books, diagrams drawn on open notebooks were half covered with loose pages. The sketches on some of the loose pages caught his attention first, for he recognized his own face on each.

He skimmed over the ones of him in various compromising positions. Drawn, Lan Wangji assumed, to brainstorm patterns to tie him up with. Any other time he would be intrigued by the process, picking out his favorites, contemplated asking if Wei Ying might want a model for his art. But for once, he was the furthest thing from in the mood.

The ones of him in casual, domestic circumstances. With A-Yuan and A-Xi, or swinging his sword, or relaxed with his hair down as he played his guqin were harder to ignore.

He uncovered another and despite himself, his breath caught. Wei Ying had captured him smiling, rendering every detail with loving attention. The Lan Wangji in the portrait looked happy, in love.

He'd thought he had been.

Lan Wangji crumpled the portrait into a ball in his fist, thinking to throw it out the window and off the cliff.

A breath later he was frantically smoothing it out on the desk. He rolled it into a tube, shoving it up his sleeve, into a qiankun bag for safekeeping.

The notebook beneath it was heavily used. Wei Ying had crammed characters into each page until they nearly overlapped. It was open to a page describing his methodology for making the vibrating plug he used on Lan Wangji at Koi Tower, but flipping back a few pages revealed Wei Ying used it to document his final conclusions on other inventions as well.

A dark smudge stained the corner of the page with a diagram of the four pieces of Yin Iron, and the sword. Lan Wangji had to squint to make out the text.

- Yin Iron pieces inextricably interconnected.
- Sealing one piece away does not prevent transfer of energy.
- Undead monkeys appeared again after A-Ma's most recent fit.
- This is the fifth time the events have correlated – leaking of resentment from Wen Ruohan's reaches all the way to the mountain
- All five pieces must be destroyed at once or the backlash will flood the other pieces, and anyone connected. Neither A-Ma nor the caster would survive.
- Piece of Yin Iron obtained from Xue Yang.
- Possession of a piece does not enable all resentment to be transferred from A-Ma to the Yin Iron.
- Transferring resentment with Chenqing can alleviate symptoms for several weeks, but leaves her tired.
- ~~Cannot sever the connection without destroying the pieces~~
- Correction: a new connection may be severed by purging the core and meridians over several weeks.
- Final attempt to find an alternative disrupted by Peacock.
- No choice but to go through with it.

“It” was the diagram, a circular array with points at the four cardinal directions and a second at the center, for the sword. Positions for two people were indicated on either side of the sword with squares. One position was shaded dark, the other left the off-white of the paper. The empty square was labeled with... Yiling Laozu.

Wei Ying never referred to himself by that title without a reason.

The Yiling Laozu position was shown to be channeling spiritual energy. *Demonic cultivator bears light* was scribbled along a line that led to the sword.

Dread built in his chest, his stomach roiling, his eyesight blurred as he delayed looking at the other position. But he swallowed back the nausea, blinked his eyes clear, and looked.

It was another moment before the characters resolved into words he could comprehend. *Powerful cultivator, using resentment for the first time*, the dark position was labeled. *Lan Wangji?* Was written beside it, crossed out.

And below, the ink running to near illegibility by a long-dried drop of water:

*Lan Zhan.*

The notebook fell from numb fingers, its spine cracking as it hit the ground face down.

He had never been anything more than a means to an end.

### *The Present*

The Burial Mounds Banquet Hall made its debut with a feast for the people, starting with the unveiling of the thrones. The entire town turned out for the celebration, and the once-ruined hall buzzed with the sound of their voices.

They were audible from the tunnels, which ended abruptly just outside the hall.

“Is this where it ends?” One of the disciples dramatically dug their nails into their cheeks and threw themselves against the wall, only to stumble through an exit disguised as another illusory wall. The others rushed out after, already teasing in a way that suggested the joker would never live it down.

Lan Wangji stepped through after, blinking against the bright light of the hall. The disciples were not about to injure themselves or breaking rules by Yiling Wei’s standards, so all he had to do was stand around and direct anyone who attempted to offer their congratulations to Wen Ning.

No matter Lan Wangji’s current mood, Wen Ning more than deserved the praise.

Wen Ning was bright pink, flustered, and surrounded by a crowd by the time he made it to the shrouded thrones. “Everyone, please! Turn your attention to the thrones.” He pulled the shroud off from over them, pushed the old carpenter forward in his place, and ran to hide behind his sister before the shroud finished billowing to the ground.

The tall, wide-shouldered boy attempting to hide behind his petite sister fooled no one, but worked anyhow. But no one would dare get between Wen Qing and her baby brother.

The base of the thrones were piles of bones, carved with disturbing realism. But the seat and backs were red spider lilies, framed by petrified wood in its natural color, polished till it gleamed. Little birds in white and brown rested on the sprawling tips of the lily.

Life sprouting from death would forever be the symbol of Yiling Wei.

Lan Wangji picked at his food. He did not wish to offend the cooks by showing he did not appreciate their offerings, but the smell turned his stomach. He couldn’t force down even a bite.

“I meant to find you earlier, before Wen Ning distracted me,” Wei Wuxian said from behind him.

Lan Wangji startled, used to having a sense of where his husband was whenever he was nearby. But he had lost track of time, stirring his vegetables and rice into a mush as he dwelled, and missed Wei Wuxian extracting himself from a conversation with the town magistrate. He looked up slowly, schooling his expression to extreme stillness, the way he'd learned to whenever one of the elders spoke of his mother.

Wei Wuxian continued. "There are things I should have told you a long time ago. You don't seem to be enjoying the feast so uh, would now work?"

"I have questions for you as well," Lan Wangji said. Flat, emotionless. The way he wished he felt.

Wei Wuxian's forehead wrinkled. In concern. Hurt by his lack of reaction. An expression of care, for Lan Wangji. Or at least it looked that way.

Lan Wangji couldn't allow himself to care. He *couldn't*. It wasn't safe.

Wei Wuxian continued, "I'll answer anything you want to know now, Lan Zhan. Anything."

His offer was little, and late. And in the wake of his betrayal, Lan Wangji was not certain it was not too much so.

He needed Wei Wuxian to admit the truth to his face, or he would never find the strength to leave. He would only stew in his anger until he turned bitter. Like his uncle, forever blaming love for costing him his brother and the life he planned, never asking if there was more to the story.

Those sketches of him, made for no possible reason but because Wei Wuxian wanted to draw him. The way Wei Wuxian had treated him as not only desirable, but capable. Consulting him in the running of the sect, yielding where Lan Wangji had greater experience, finding glee in their sparring. His equal in everything but this one thing.

"Did you know you would find me in the Xuanwu of Slaughter's cave?" Had he swept in to save him, and set all this in motion on purpose? Manipulated him from the start?

"No, of course not. How would I...?" Wei Wuxian looked confused, but Lan Wangji was no longer certain what was real, and what was a façade.

"Will you tell me what you know of the Yin Iron?" His mouth spoke, though he had no control over it.

"Yes, I – yes." Wei Wuxian stuttered, put off guard, and Lan Wangji's mind attempted to revert to his birth name. "From the beginning of my time in the Burial Mounds, everything about it. I – Lan Zhan, did something happen?"

He did not have the chance to reply.

A child, playing near the entrance to the banquet hall's open door, screamed.



Lan Wangji sprang to the doorway, Bichen in his hand, his husband at his side for perhaps the last time.

A man all in white with a young girl clinging to his hand emerged from the trees and collapsed to his knees at the gate.

## Chapter End Notes

I hope you're sticking with me, and you WILL find out everything from wtf Wei Wuxian thinks he's doing to the identity of the thief very soon!

[Promo Tweet](#)


# Chapter 21

## Chapter Summary

Xiao Xingchen arrives at the Burial Mounds gravely injured. But will Wangxian finally talk?

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** minor character injury, minor character undeath, and past minor character death (but described in more detail than before), also safe word use (lwj tries to ignore his problems with sex and wwx tries to be into it at first but ends it)

Thanks so much to Jehan for betaing this chapter 

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Xiao Xingchen fell to his knees at the Burial Mounds gate. Wei Wuxian, once again, was interrupted in his attempt to tell his husband the truth. But he couldn't worry about the delay when he didn't know how badly his shishu was hurt.

He leaped across the courtyard, landing a short distance away. At that distance, he could see Xiao Xingchen swaying on his knees, a spreading scarlet stain seeping through layers of white robes despite the hand pressed to his wound. "Shishu! Wen Qing, get over here!"

"Don't worry about me," Xiao Xingchen insisted, though his skin seemed to gray as every beat of his heart bled him dry. "It's Zichen, he has Zichen. Help him, A-Xian, please!"

Who, precisely, was *he* ? Xiao Xingchen had used all his energy to make it to the Burial Mounds. Wei Wuxian couldn't question him, or he would pass out and stop holding his guts in, and then Wei Wuxian would get yelled at by Wen Qing. But Xiao Xingchen wasn't the only one who'd seen what happened to Song Lan.

"Help yourself first!" The little girl Xiao Xingchen was holding squirmed out of his grasp and put her hands on her hips. She rounded on Wei Wuxian, her eyes startlingly white but clearly looking right at him. "Can you help my Daozhang?"

She still managed to sound imperious even asking for help, with her eyes puffy and nose dripping from a long and entirely understandable crying fit. Such a brave little one,

demanding help from a tall, armed stranger.

Hoping to put her at ease, Wei Wuxian knelt so she could look down at him. “My friend Wen Qing can. She’s the best doctor in the world, and your Daozhang is a strong cultivator. She’ll be here any moment. I’m Wei Wuxian, your Daozhang is my shishu. What’s your name?”

“A-Qing,” she sniffed.

Wen Qing finally bustled up, kit in hand, and knocked into him on her way to her weakly protesting patient. She ripped his robes to access the wound, and got to work. She stuffed a leather bit in his mouth and told him to bite down, pulled his hands away from the wound and cleaned its edges before stringing a needle with quick, practiced motions.

“See? The doctor knows what she’s doing. Wen Qing will have him patched up in no time.” Wei Wuxian drew the girl’s attention away from the surgery. If she was sewing him up here, rather than transporting Xiao Xingchen to a sickbed, he was in bad shape. A-Qing shouldn’t have to watch this. No child should. “Can I get you some food while my friend helps yours?”

“I —” A-Qing glanced back at Xiao Xingchen, hesitant to leave him, but nauseous at the sight of so much blood.

“What she’s doing looks scarier than it is, I promise. You can keep watch over him as soon as she’s done, but you’ll be a fiercer protector with a full belly.” He offered his hand to her, but she grabbed hold of his sleeve instead.

“Okay.”

Before Wei Wuxian could lead her into the crowded reception hall, Lan Zhan beckoned them over to an empty room. He’d already set several dishes on the table within for A-Qing to choose from. So efficient, his husband.

“Good thinking, Lan Zhan. We don’t want to overwhelm her,” he whispered as A-Qing settled in front of a bowl. But it seemed Lan Zhan was back to pretending he was a ghost, speaking but not heard.

Ignoring the jolt in his chest, he watched as A-Qing piled food onto her rice, shoveled it into her mouth faster than she could chew and swallow, like she expected it to be taken away at any second. Wei Wuxian was intimately familiar with those signs. It had taken months before he stopped thinking every bun would be snatched from his hands if he didn’t choke it down in one bite. Over a year before he stopped thinking the next meal wouldn’t come.

Xiao Xingchen might have left his roots behind, but he was as much a product of Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi’s tutelage as any of their students.

“This one’s my favorite,” Lan Zhan said to A-Qing, pointing to the most sugary dish on the table, a platter of sweet buns.

“Mmm!” A-Qing took three, and shoved one in her mouth whole.

Lan Zhan quickly placed a cup of tea in her hand to head off a coughing fit from all the starch.

Lan Zhan was like magic with children, such a natural it was almost like he could read their minds and anticipate whether they wanted candy or mud potions. Wei Wuxian wanted so badly to see him as a father to their children. But Lan Zhan couldn't read *his* mind, and there had never been a good way to come clean.

But, he reminded himself, he could come clean when a friend's life wasn't at risk. So how best to get that information from A-Qing?

A-Qing looked to be about seven, A-Xi's age, but might have been slightly older, based on her attitude outside. She was dressed in miniature, feminine versions of Xiao Xingchen's clothes, which was just like his shishu, and suggested they might have been traveling together long enough for her to have outgrown her last clothing. Xiao Xingchen was more ascetic in his spending practices than the Lan, who, despite their origins, all seemed to have a taste for beautiful things.

He regretted not keeping better track of his shishu when they parted after killing Xue Yang, but between his unexpected guests, the war, and learning to manage a sect, he hadn't had the time. His great enemy was still out there. Xiao Xingchen's was dead. But it seemed he'd found a new one while Wei Wuxian wasn't looking.

"How did you meet your Daozhang?" Wei Wuxian asked, when A-Qing finally slowed the pace of her food consumption, thinking it might be easier than to jump right into how his Shishu wound up stabbed.

"I tried to steal from him," she said around a mouthful of half-chewed food.

Yes, that sounded right. Baoshan Sanren's student indeed. His grandmothers' old tricks should work on her as well as they had on him. "Let me guess, he let you think you'd gotten away with it and surprised you around the corner when you least expected it?"

She giggled around a bit of bun. "How did you know?!"

"He pulled that trick on me during training a few times before I got wise to it," Wei Wuxian confided. "How'd he get you to stick around?"

"He took his bag back and handed me all the money! I figured I better keep track of it for him or someone would take advantage." She huffed, affronted by the generosity of her target, who she probably still thought she was conning into taking care of her.

"Definitely not you," Wei Wuxian teased.

"Never." She shook her head as far as it would go to each side for emphasis.

Though Lan Zhan gave a little shake of his head, Wei Wuxian asked, "A-Qing, do you think you can tell me what happened?"

“I guess.” She shifted in place, shrinking in on herself. But she spoke, rapidly, like the words wouldn’t come if she didn’t get them out immediately. “We were looking for Daozhang’s partner. They were supposed to meet up in the town where Daozhang found me, but he never showed. We found someone who’d seen him, and followed his trail toward Yiling but — we were attacked. Daozhang told me to hide, but I watched anyway. There was a man in black and white with a blindfold and Daozhang called him ‘Zichen’ but he kept slashing at Daozhang with his sword. He had these creepy black veins on his neck, and then I stepped on a twig, and he came at me and — and —”

“Shishu jumped in front of the blade, didn’t he?” Of course he would, rather than harm his cultivation partner or allow him to harm a child. Wei Wuxian would do the same.

Sniffling, she nodded.

Lan Zhan pulled her into his lap, glaring at him over her head. Petting her hair, Lan Zhan said, “You did very well.”

What was he supposed to do? Wen Qing would be in surgery for a while yet, and there was every chance that someone was in danger *now*.

“You did,” Wei Wuxian said softly.

Neither replied.

Wei Wuxian got to his feet, and slid the door open. Wen Qing must have stabilized Xiao Xingchen enough to move him, because the only sign of them was a bloodstain in the dirt where Xiao Xingchen had lain. And Wen Ning, coming from the direction of her clinic.

“Wen Ning! How is he?” He hollered, and Wen Ning came jogging over.

“Jie knocked him out, but he’ll be okay so long as he stays in bed until she says otherwise.”

Which Xiao Xingchen wouldn’t do, with Song Lan missing. “Can you take A-Qing here back to your sister’s patient? It seems Lan Zhan and I have to catch my shishu’s errant cultivation partner.”

“Of course. Jie is setting up a cot for the girl by Xiao Xingchen’s bed.”

“Daozhang?” Her expression alight with hope, A-Qing pushed herself up out of Lan Zhan’s lap. “He’s okay?”

“He will be. Wen Ning here can take you to him.”

Despite her full stomach, A-Qing sprinted past him into the courtyard, barely waiting for Wen Ning to point out the way.

So.

Lan Zhan was mad. Soon to be furious. Wei Wuxian had no right to ask anything of him. Ever again, but especially not right now. Yet if he knew his husband at all...

“Lan Zhan, I know you’re angry at me. And please believe me, while I want nothing less than to have this conversation, I know how much we need to.” Every moment he waited only made things worse between them. “But I think our thief turned my shishu’s cultivation partner into a fierce corpse. Can we find him first? Please? If there’s any chance —”

“The lives of others are always most important,” Lan Zhan said, and Wei Wuxian could see him mentally piling up all of the ways Wei Wuxian had wronged him and setting them on a shelf for later.

“ *Thank you* , Lan Zhan. I don’t deserve you.”

For the first time, Lan Zhan didn’t make that little huff of disagreement.

Right then.

Closing his eyes, Wei Wuxian reached out into his lands for the nearest sources of resentment. A single fierce corpse wasn’t enough to trigger his wards, not even one made from Song Lan. But if he sank deep enough into a search of lands he knew as intimately as his own core, he could find one.

There, on the outskirts of Yiling, headed towards the Burial Mounds. Lucky the town was empty for the evening’s festivities, or lives could have been lost before Wei Wuxian heard of its presence. There was a red haze over his vision when he opened his eyes.

He held out his hand, and Lan Zhan took it more hesitantly than usual. But then Wei Wuxian closed resentment around them and stepped between life and death. This manner of transport wasn’t generally a good way to approach monsters, but today he was out of patience. A single step surrounded by whispering spirits, and they were in someone’s yard. Nearby, a chicken squawked indignantly.

A sword plunged through the clearing resentment toward his head. Lan Zhan moved faster than the blink of an eye to deflect the blow, throwing the attacker back into the stairs of the farmhouse. The wood splintered beneath his weight.

What was left of Song Lan hissed as he climbed back to his feet. Black blood dripped from beneath the bandage over his eyes, transforming his face into a melting horror. But his skin, though an unnatural pale gray, was skin, and not the volcanic terrain of an infectious puppet. The resentment clogging his meridians was slippery to his senses, blocking Wei Wuxian from stealing control or getting the details of what had been done to him. He could get through the block with talismans, but only if Song Lan stayed still long enough to pile on a sufficient number. He would be more effective with Chenqing, but he couldn’t play, place talismans, and dodge Song Lan’s blows all at the same time.

Better safe than sorry. “Don’t get his blood on you. I don’t think he’s a puppet, but —”

“He’s not.”

“Ah?” How could Lan Zhan tell better than him?

“Distract him,” Lan Zhan sheathed Bichen and swept his arm out to summon his guqin.

Far be it from him to contradict his husband when he was angry. If Lan Zhan had an idea, Wei Wuxian had no doubt he would succeed.

As Song Lan charged, Wei Wuxian stepped between him and Lan Zhan. He deflected the blow of his sword with Suibian, and at the same time bashed him in the teeth with its sheath.

Barely phased, Song Lan hissed and focused his wild swings on Wei Wuxian. Any ordinary fierce corpse would already be dead. Unfortunately, a fierce corpse as strong as Song Lan was far more difficult to distract than kill.

Wei Wuxian ducked, and weaved, and jumped in front of Song Lan, trying to keep himself the primary target. But the fierce corpse was inclined to go for what seemed like easier prey: Lan Zhan. There were no rules to the fierce corpse’s swordplay, just unrestrained, unseeing hunger for life, because his had been stolen.

With the next clash of their swords, Song Lan’s went flying. It clattered against the porch of the house, but Song Lan’s hands were now the more dangerous weapon. He launched himself at Wei Wuxian, his hands curved like claws, and Wei Wuxian put his sheath up to block. Xiao Xingchen would be upset if he sliced open Song Lan’s hands. But Song Lan tore the sheath from his grasp, throwing it aside, and grabbed hold of Wei Wuxian’s robes. They tore as Wei Wuxian brought Suibian’s hilt down on his forehead.

Song Lan tried, again, then, for Lan Zhan, so Wei Wuxian kicked him hard in the stomach, sending him sprawling, sliding across the yard to rest at the base of the chicken cages.

So close to him, the little lives proved tempting, and Song Lan tore open the lock on a cage, reaching in to grasp a plump hen. Only for a net of light to wrap around him. It tightened around him until he was fully immobilized, snapping his legs together, his arms against his torso. He thrashed against his bonds, growling and snapping his teeth like a rabid animal.

Wei Wuxian pulled a sheaf of talisman paper from his sleeve and began scrawling on one sheet after the next, sticking the papers to limbs and head while Lan Zhan held the net. Once Song Lan finally lay still, Lan Zhan finished his song with three final plucks of the strings, and the net dissolved into sparkles that dissipated on the breeze.

Now, Wei Wuxian could examine what had been done to him, the resentment responding at his command and spilling forth its secrets. Though not the name of its master. “Just a regular fierce corpse. How did you know?”

“My cultivation has improved,” Lan Zhan said.

*My perfect match*, Wei Wuxian thought, already in mourning for what he was about to lose.

“What?”

Apparently, he’d said that aloud. Fuck. Lan Zhan’s expression was sour. He wasn’t pleased at the thought now, if there had ever been a chance he would be. “We should get him back to the

Burial Mounds. And then — I'm long past out of excuses."

"Your mysterious disturbance is the reason why we haven't destroyed the Yin Iron yet," Wei Wuxian explained to Xiao Xingchen. "This thief stole it, knows far more than they should about how to use it, knows too much about *me*. They may have targeted you to get at me, and I am so, so sorry."

At Wen Qing's instruction, A-Qing was sitting on his calves to prevent him from getting up and ripping his stitches, so he settled for staring forlornly at the talisman-covered form of his cultivation partner.

"Unless you killed him yourself, I don't blame you, A-Xian. But I must ask, can you help him?" Xiao Xingchen was all hope and heartbreak.

It wasn't really up to Wei Wuxian whether he could bring Song Lan back or not, but to a silent listener.

"Hello, Song Lan. You can come out now." Wei Wuxian lent him the energy to make himself corporeal, and Song Lan's ghost coalesced from shadow, close to Xiao Xingchen's bed. With a cry, Xiao Xingchen reached out for him, only for his hand to swipe through Song Lan's form with only a ripple. He looked exactly like his body, down to the bloody strip of cloth over his empty eye sockets, but conscious, if not entirely alert.

As a temple foundling, Song Lan had not received the soul-calming ceremony. And so now he had a choice to make. Return to a body that had been stolen from him, or accept that his life had been cut short.

"So, Song Lan, *can* I help you?" Wei Wuxian asked.

*I don't know.*

"What do you remember?" New ghosts could be drawn back to themselves with their most easily accessible memories, but since those were often traumatic, it could be risky. Wei Wuxian kept a hand on Chenqing, just in case.

*I was in a field*, Song Lan said, slow and hesitant at first, but gaining confidence. *There was a body there. It was empty — drained of qi. The body was still warm. I was supposed to meet up with Xingchen, but I knew I'd finally caught up to it. There was a trail — a second person was missing, it had another victim. I followed, until I found it in the tall grass and — it — he — he turned to me and said, I remember you.*

"Did you see his face?"

Song Lan's form wavered, flickering. Xiao Xingchen again tried to rise, only for Wen Qing to stick him in the back of his neck with a needle, forcing him to stay in place.

"He bound you not to tell." Wei Wuxian felt it, in the very being of him. "I may be able to undo it, but only if you're willing to stay. And not now, there's something I need to do first."



Wei Wuxian glanced at Lan Zhan, but though his husband was looking at him, his eyes were not on his face, but on his chest, where Song Lan had ripped his robes.

Song Lan hovered near Xiao Xingchen.

“Zichen, I...” Xiao Xingchen swallowed heavily. “It’s your choice.”

*I don’t want to leave him alone.* Song Lan said, to Wei Wuxian.

“He wouldn’t be. But even if he won’t say it, he’ll be happier with you still here,” Wei Wuxian told him. He was biased, true, not wanting his Shishu to lose his cultivation partner so soon. But he thought Song Lan might be too. “Song Zichen, it’s time to make a choice. Are you ready to move on, or do you want a second chance at a different sort of life?”

Song Lan didn’t answer for a long moment, staring at his empty body bound in talismans.

“If he stays, I want you to give him my eyes,” Xiao Xingchen whispered to Wen Qing, apparently not realizing ghosts had excellent hearing.

*What? No!* Song Lan shouted. Though no one but Wei Ying could hear, they could see the way his ghost ballooned in size. *I want to stay with him, but not at that cost.*

Wen Qing headed off their arguments. “I’m not doing that.”

“But he —”

Again she silenced him, with a sharp gesture across her mouth. “Better one eye each than switching which one of you is blind, idiot. This way, maybe he’ll even accept it. And since he’s a fierce corpse, we won’t have to worry about his body rejecting it.”

Xiao Xingchen blinked rapidly, realizing all at once how foolhardy his proposition had been. “Ah, yes — that. That would make sense. We can learn to deal with lack of depth perception together.”

*This is stupid. What does a fierce corpse need with eyes?* Song Lan complained.

“Before I convey that sentiment, you should know that it’s difficult for fierce corpses to control their strength when they can see. If you’d been blind before it wouldn’t be a problem, but — as it stands, adjusting to complete blindness at the same time as the increase in strength would be... difficult.” Difficult to judge his strength, if he walked into a table by mistake, or put his hand down on a cup rather than solid wood.

*You think I could hurt him by mistake.* Song Lan drew back from Xiao Xingchen’s side, though there was no danger of it now.

“You might even if you accept. Just like it’s up to you whether you stay, it’s up to him whether he’s willing to take the risk.” It wasn’t lost on him that Lan Zhan would soon have a similar decision to make.

This time, Xiao Xingchen took the right cue. “Can we make this compromise, Zichen? I’m not ready to lose you.”

Song Lan groaned, rubbing his gray, ghostly forehead with his hand. *If I say we’ll agree on something, will you shove me back into my body so I can talk to him?*

“Sure. But don’t touch anything.” Wei Wuxian grabbed hold of Song Lan’s ghost and sewed him back into the seams of himself.

Song Lan sat up immediately, making everyone jump. Even Wei Wuxian. He rustled, shedding talismans as he patted the bed beneath him. The wood creaked ominously, and he froze, remembering Wei Wuxian’s proscription.

“We’ll give you some space to talk about it.” Wen Qing said. “Won’t we, A-Qing?”

“Uh-huh,” the girl nodded, grossed out by the mere verbal expression of romance. “Can I have more dessert?”

“We’ll see. And you,” Wen Qing pointed at Xiao Xingchen. “Don’t think you can get out of bed. And don’t touch him.”

Xiao Xingchen, who had already started trying to push himself up in bed, shrank back down into the mattress.

The four of them left Xiao Xingchen and Song Lan alone. While Wen Qing took A-Qing off to raid the remains of the feast, Wei Wuxian fought not to drag his feet as he followed Lan Zhan to their rooms.

“About that conversation —” Wei Wuxian slid the door to their bedroom closed behind him, and turned, expecting to find Lan Zhan settling himself by the table.

Only Lan Zhan was right behind him, so close Wei Wuxian could have counted his eyelashes. Surging forward, Lan Zhan kissed him, hard and bruising, stealing the air from his lungs.

*What?* He tried to ask around Lan Zhan’s tongue, but it came out only as a startled mumble. Though he knew he shouldn’t, Wei Wuxian kissed him back, meeting him with equal passion. There was none of the playful sweetness he preferred in the desperate plunging of their tongues into each other’s mouth. It wasn’t even a good kiss, by their own standards. Of the many they’d shared between them, too many to count, all had felt better. But this was Lan Zhan, and Wei Wuxian had thought he would never kiss him again.

Wei Wuxian was not a strong man where his husband was involved. As much time as he’d spent taking control in bed, Lan Zhan did not have to kiss him, crook a finger, say *I want you* to seduce him. All he needed was a look, and Wei Wuxian would bend over backwards to meet his every whim.

Without freeing his mouth for a moment, Lan Zhan struggled with the ties of his robes. When the tie came free, he grabbed the collar and walked backwards toward their bed. The back of

Lan Zhan's knees hit the bed, and they tumbled down onto the mattress together. Their teeth clacked together, and the burst of pain made him startle back. An incomplete thought sparked in him, a reminder they were supposed to be talking, not falling back into bed like they had less control over their libidos than rabbits.

"What are you doing? We shouldn't — " He could barely remember why they shouldn't.

Lan Zhan shook his head furiously. "Need this, I need this."

"What do you need?"

Lan Zhan clasped his hands together over his head and glared up at him. "Guess."

That was, in fact, easy enough. With his elbows bent so his linked hands rested just above his guan, Wei Wuxian could press them down into the mattress and still reach all Lan Zhan's most erogenous spots. Give it to him rough and fast with little prelude.

It was what Lan Zhan wanted.

Some of the tension went out of Lan Zhan with the pressure on his hands, but not all, not enough. Wei Wuxian kissed him, soft and brief, tracing his way down to the knot tying Lan Zhan's robes, but Lan Zhan bit his lip as Wei Wuxian tried to pull away. Hard enough to draw blood, demanding his tongue to fill his mouth. Wei Wuxian had to undo Lan Zhan's robes one-handed, fumble between the layers for the jar he kept there. The lid came off, spilling its contents over Lan Zhan's belly, making him shudder and gasp against his mouth.

Wei Wuxian scooped some of the lubricant up on his fingers, barely warming it between his fingers before he freed Lan Zhan's cock from his pants, and rubbed his thumb over the tip. But he didn't waste time, knowing Lan Zhan's patience was thin, grasped him with a pressure that could bring him off quickly, and moved his hand over his length.

Lan Zhan made an irritated noise, and bucked at him, letting him know a hand job was *not* sufficient.

*What happened to foreplay? Patience, Hanguang-jun.* Wei Wuxian would have teased him any other day, pinned his legs so he could spend as much time stroking him to the edge of completion as he wanted before *maybe* giving him what he wanted. But not today.

Wei Wuxian managed to separate their lips so he could see what he was doing as he tried to get Lan Zhan's pants off one-handed. Lan Zhan lifted his hips, using his feet to draw his pants down past his knees, to pool around his ankles where they would form a second binding as Wei Wuxian fucked him.

"Fuck me, fuck me, fuck me." Lan Zhan pleaded in a tight voice as Wei Wuxian coated his cock with more of the spilled lubricant, slipped a hand down to his hole. "Hurry, please, I need —"

No more foreplay, then. As Wei Wuxian went to line up his cock to push in, he looked up at Lan Zhan. His eyes were ringed with red, puffy, but forced open despite the tears rolling

down his cheeks. Like he was afraid Wei Wuxian would disappear if he so much as blinked.

Lan Zhan was crying, and he'd barely done anything.

Something was very, very wrong.

He let go of his hands, intending to roll off him. But Lan Zhan grabbed his shoulders, pulling him down to lie flat on his chest. He could feel Lan Zhan's heart beating against his chest, the rhythm discordant with his own. Lan Zhan bit the tendon where his neck met his shoulder, harder than usual. Wei Wuxian yelped and got some of Lan Zhan's hair in his mouth by mistake.

"I want this," Lan Zhan insisted. He reached between them to find Wei Wuxian's cock, ground down on him with the heel of his hand, easily bringing his flagging erection back to full hardness. "I want you."

But whether Lan Zhan truly wanted him now or not, however much he wanted it, he couldn't do this.

"Turtle!" He shouted, grabbing Lan Zhan's wrist, pulling it off his cock so he could jump to his feet, backing away from the bed. "Turtle."

Lan Wangji thought he was hearing things when Wei Wuxian used their safe word.

After the way it felt to work with Wei Wuxian, Lan Wangji *needed* him, one last time. But Wei Wuxian couldn't even let him have that.

No, Wei Wuxian put as much space between them as he could, packed himself away, and had the audacity to act confused. "First, you're angry, now you're — I don't even know what you're doing. Trying to fuck our problems away?"

Lan Wangji wiped at his eyes and started pulling his robes back together. He was hot with humiliation, burning with it, angrier than he could ever remember being. Wei Wuxian always drew out strong emotions in him. If *these* were all he had left, he didn't want it.

It would have been better if they never met. But Wei Wuxian had sought him out, hadn't he? Fate had nothing to do with finding him in that cave. "Isn't that what you've been doing to me all along?"

Wei Wuxian was struck speechless.

"I already know." Lan Wangji pulled Wen Ning's portal token from his sleeve, and held it up. "You left your plans on your desk."

Wei Wuxian swayed, claspings his chest like Lan Wangji had stabbed him in the heart. His jaw dropped as the horror of having been found out finally dawned on his features. Slowly, he sank to his knees. His hair had come undone while Lan Wangji pulled at his clothes, and it fell forward to conceal his downcast eyes. "I — I'm sorry."

Lan Wangji refused the tug at his heartstrings those words caused. This wasn't something he could just *apologize* for. "That I found out you've been using me all along?"

Wei Wuxian looked up, lurching forward. He caught himself on one hand, the other reaching out toward him. " *Using* you? What? Lan Zhan, no, I —"

"I overheard you as well. You. Baoshan Sanren. Wen Qing."

"I never said..." Wei Wuxian frowned.

"You married me, and you didn't trust me. You lied to me. I'm a tool to you." Lan Wangji had thought it would help to confront him. That it might sever the part of him that still yearned for something and someone who never existed.

It didn't.

Wei Wuxian blinked rapidly, holding back tears he had no right to shed. And said, "You're right. I lied, I didn't trust you enough when it counted. I should have told you a long time ago." Then, his voice cracked. "But Lan Zhan, you have *never* been a tool to me."

"I don't believe you." He couldn't afford to.

"You won't believe my words, fine. I can show you." Wei Wuxian sat back with his legs crossed, his spine held perfectly straight, a posture that would have satisfied even Lan Qiren. "Everything I've been holding back, from the beginning."

"Show me? You intend to use Empathy?"

Wei Wuxian needed him to destroy the Yin Iron, and this was not how it could be destroyed. He would not risk trapping Lan Wangji where he could not do what was needed. It was a ploy, an obvious one.

But without the answers Wei Wuxian offered, he would always wonder *why*. And he would never believe his reasons, spoken aloud. Memory, while often inexact, could not hide the truth.

He settled into a cross-legged position across from him on the floor of a room he'd thought was theirs, and held out his hands. "Show me then."

"Ah. Really?" Wei Wuxian hesitated, before reaching out to meet him.

Lan Wangji was so very tired of being underestimated by the man he'd pledged his life to.

He did not have time to dwell before a familiar presence reached into him, and dragged him back into memory.

At first, all he saw was darkness, immutable and all-encompassing. But then, though the darkness did not lift, he began to understand the darkness was not homogenous, but

composed of writhing ghosts all around him. Drawing close, howling unintelligibly, but never touching.

Lan Wangji was inside Wei Wuxian's head, and not. Watching him, yet privy to his thoughts. Wei Wuxian was beside him, and ahead. Five years older than him and five years younger. A master of the ghost path, and taking his last few steps from the tree with deep roots to a Burial Mounds suffused with more resentment than Wen Ruohan could call on. All the resentful ghosts that had been released in the breaking of the Yin Iron, and immediately trapped in the tomb of its former master.

Wei Wuxian brought bags of food with him to the Burial Mounds, carefully packed by all his family. Dried foods made to last, but it made no difference. Before he had taken a dozen steps into the dark, it rotted and crumbled in his qiankun bags, a sacrifice to the dead, unknowingly given.

Spirits called Wei Wuxian's name, mimicking voices from his past and present. His future. *A-Ying*, they said. *A-Xian*. *Wei Wuxian*, in anger or fear.

One stood out, the only one calling *Wei Ying*.

His own voice, strong and unafraid.

This Wei Wuxian not yet fully grown paused at the sound, straining his hearing. Knowing that voice should mean something to him yet equally certain he'd never heard it before. But the whispers of loved ones were soon drowned out by chanting, ancient voices shouting out for the destruction of the Yin Iron.

Lan Wangji had heard those chants before.

But it was not Wen Mao that came into view when the fragmented ghosts of the Burial Mounds took shape to play out the past. It was a woman, and a man, and a beast of nightmares. Lan Wangji recognized her mouth, her chin, his eyes and nose. Features passed down to their son, along with strength of character and foolhardy willingness to walk into near-certain death.

Wei Wuxian gasped at the sight of them, tried to call out a warning, but their deaths were set in stone long ago. He covered his mouth with his hands to hold back sobs as he watched.

So this was how Wei Wuxian knew the details of his parents' death. Now, in Empathy, Wei Wuxian skimmed as much for Lan Wangji's sake as his own through how his parents found the seams holding the beast together and tore through them with only a talisman light to guide them. Though Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze were skilled, they could not evade all the beasts' many heads. It tore chunks from them, but they pressed on until they fell, with nothing more to give. The beast screamed, and roared and charged forth from its lair.

It would soon collapse, but not before taking a final life. But the ghosts did not show the monster's demise. They blurred as the chanting resumed. And reformed into cultivators marching behind a man immortalized in paintings across the Cultivation World.

Wen Mao shoved a pair of heavy double doors open, revealing a cavernous chamber that had once been a throne room, and would be again hundreds of years later.

Wei Wuxian slowly lowered his hands, still shaking, but attentive. This was the story his grandmothers had told, happening before his eyes.

Then, the stones were cracked, the draperies tattered. A man huddled on the ground, his long unkempt hair concealing his face. The Yin Iron, as yet unbroken, hovered before him, leaking resentment in curls of smoke.

The man looked up, red eyes peeking through the veil of his hair. Red eyes that glowed, like Wei Wuxian's, and yet not. These eyes told the tale of a man who had driven himself far past his breaking point, until there was nothing left but a hunger for power.

"You'll end up like me, Wen Mao." The man laughed, the voices of a thousand ghosts behind his. Lan Wangji did not think it was a dramatic addition by the Burial Mounds. Creatures made of smoke and bone and rotting flesh emerged from the shadows. And though his men fell, one by one, Wen Mao was untouched. Where his sword flares struck, the constructs crumbled to dust.

Finally, only Wen Mao and the man he had come to kill remained. He offered no resistance as Wen Mao pulled back his arm to strike the final blow, save a few words. "What, no last appeal to come to my senses?"

These words did not hold the power of the Yin Iron behind them, but Wen Mao only scoffed. "You used up your last chance a long time ago."

Wen Mao plunged his sword into his chest. The demonic cultivator laughed wetly as he died. His final appeal had been no more than a trick, aimed to deliver a final wound to his killer. Lan Wangji and the younger Wei Wuxian wondered why he believed he had that power over Wen Mao, the Wei Wuxian of now already knew the answer.

Three women ran through the door behind Wen Mao. The first was short and muscular, carrying a broad, curved dao, though she was not a Nie, for the Nie did not yet exist. Chang Liyan, the breaker of the Yin Iron least remembered by history, for she had striven for a life of contentment over legacy or immortality. Lan Yi, young and healthy, regal in her Lan robes, utterly certain of herself in a way no Lan of Lan Wangji's time achieved.

Baoshan Sanren looked exactly as she did now, but this was a young woman in truth, not just appearance. "What have you *done*?" She demanded.

As the light faded from the legendary villain's eyes, the Yin Iron began to shake. The cavernous throne room shook with it. Wen Mao stumbled back, his sword emerging with a wet squelching noise, horror dawning on him as he realized what was to come.

But before Lan Wangji could watch, the figures dissolved, vanishing into wisps from the head down.

The next scene was familiar, Cangse Sanren and Wei Changze taking shape once again. Wei Wuxian whimpered, covered his eyes with his hands, but there was no respite from hell. His own skin and bone did not block out the sight.

But how did the Burial Mounds know what to show him to destroy him? It was a place, not a person, and hungry ghosts locked away here for centuries with nothing to devour but themselves and the occasional unlucky victim had no more capacity to understand the living than a rock.

Despite the torture of his mind, Wei Wuxian had not yet needed to defend himself from a single ghost.

It didn't make *sense* .

*Unless*, Lan Wangji thought.

*Unless* , echoed the young Wei Wuxian.

"Someone is showing me this on purpose," Wei Wuxian whispered. Called out, louder, into the darkness. "Xue Chonghai, show your face!"

The scene completed, began again.

Wei Wuxian couldn't watch it again. He screamed until he was hoarse, and panting, and his parents stepped toward the beast a fourth time. And only then he remembered why he had come here. He grabbed blindly in his bag for his dizi, fingers brushing against the moldering mush that had been his supplies. He played long, screeching notes without a rhythm, reaching out instinctively into the dark with his mind. Until, finally, a fish caught on his hook.

A single ghost separated from the masses, its features gradually congealing into the man from the second vision, but he remained part shadow, a ghost so old and corrupt his shape no longer truly belonged to him. His legs did not form at all. Yet his eyes still glowed that same sickly red. "I wondered how long it would take you to figure out."

It was the first time Wei Wuxian called a ghost into being, his first use of resentment. It left a coating like slime over his core. One day, that coating would solidify into a shield as he practiced his cultivation. But now, it made him feel contaminated, like he had made himself part of the Burial Mounds. "Who but the creator of the Yin Iron could control this place?"

"Who indeed? What a clever little master you are," Xue Chonghai drawled, moving in lazy circles around Wei Wuxian, forcing him to spin with him or show a nightmare his back.

"Why? Why show me what you did to my parents? Why toy with me instead of gobbling me up like everyone else who's ever set foot here?"

Leave it to Wei Wuxian to be angry no one was trying to kill him, Lan Wangji thought. And then he heard the fear in his voice, and one of the fortifications he'd built around his heart cracked.



“Silly boy. I toy with everyone I eat. Playing with my food is one of the few amusements I have, here in this prison the women you call your grandmothers made for me,” Xue Chonghai said. “Yes, I know who you are. I saw you outside my domain as a child, fleeing to where *those women* have hidden for centuries. I knew you then. I know you better now. Your soul bared itself to me the moment you entered my domain. But why show you this? Why not assemble a monster to tear you apart like your parents? Why not take my revenge on my enemies through you?”

“Yeah.” Wei Ying shook a finger at Xue Chonghai before crossing his arms across his chest, surreptitiously hugging himself. “That.”

This ghost killed Wei Ying’s parents, but he didn’t rail against him, didn’t shout, though he felt all of that fury and more. Xue Chonghai was the demon parents warned children of to keep them in line, and Wei Ying sassed him to his face. Lan Wangji could not exist within the memory of this boy—this terrified, heartbroken child, and yet still so brave—and maintain the resolution to use only his courtesy name.

Xue Chonghai swooped down so close the embers of his eyes burned Wei Ying’s skin.

“Because, Wei Wuxian of the Mountain, born Wei Ying, child of my streets and my enemies. You will set me free.”

## Chapter End Notes

Surprise?

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 22

## Chapter Summary

Lan Wangji unlocks Wei Wuxian's tragic backstory (again)

## Chapter Notes

In this chapter Lan Wangji uses “Wei Ying” to refer to 15 yo Wei Wuxian and “Wei Wuxian” to refer to his older self, because he’s upset with him.

Please forgive me in advance and I totally mean for my attempt at poetry and not the worst cliffhanger of this fic

Thanks to Jehan again for betaing!

**CW:** psychological torment, violence, mostly off screen depictions of mass murder and child death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Ying laughed in the face of the Cultivation World’s first and greatest scourge. “Set you free? Why on Earth would I do that?”

“I said you will, not that you want to.” Xue Chonghai passed through Wei Ying, leaving him so chilled to his core that Lan Wangji nearly snapped back into his own body. As he floated away, gesturing at the ghosts around them so they flooded down towards him in a river of dark souls, Lan Wangji could see Xue Chonghai’s soul was even more deteriorated from behind. “Now, where should we begin?”

Xue Chonghai turned, sweeping his arms down, and the ghosts, or what was left of them, cascaded toward the ground. An imitation of light burst outward where they hit, creating a stage lit with gray nothingness. Until, gradually, a farmyard took shape, blurry and incomplete. There was a pig pen — empty, then not, the pigs flickering in and out of existence, a different number every time, until Wei Ying had to look away to fight off an oncoming headache.

For a time, nothing more happened, until Xue Chonghai huffed, and tore a ghost from the scenery, shredding it to threads that joined the landscape anew.

The metallic clang of swords clashing split the air. Laughter rang out. Not the cruel, maniacal laughter of Xue Chonghai, but of a young man, fending off a flurry of attacks from another boy of about the same age.

No, the laughter *was* Xue Chonghai's, but he was near unrecognizable, the picture of health. A square-jawed sort of handsome without a hint of resentment around him. He was dressed simply, more like a common soldier than a cultivator in worn but well-tailored brown robes, near identical to his opponent's, who faced away.

His opponent backed him against the fence of the pig pen, but Xue Chonghai grabbed a nearby bale of hay and threw it in his face. Kicking off the fence to somersault over the fence, he stabbed forward with his blade, intending to win the fight. But the other man grabbed his wrist, and spun them together, chest to chest.

"Hey," Xue Chonghai said, and stole a kiss that lingered, with a comfortable familiarity, until they were interrupted.

"Xue Chonghai, Wen Mao, if you two can't focus together, I *will* pair you with other partners." The speaker was Chang Liyan. Absent one moment, pieced together by fragmented ghosts the next, her muscular forearms bared and crossed over her chest. The gray streaks in her hair were fewer, but she otherwise looked much the same as in the vision of Xue Chonghai's final downfall.

"What other partners, Shifu?" Xue Chonghai grinned in the arrogant way of a man who knew he was charming. "We're your best students."

Wen Mao pinched the bridge of his nose. Looking for all the world like his many times great granddaughter, though of all his descendants, his features most closely resembled her brother's. Yet here Wen Mao was in his youth, the lover of the man he was known for defeating, as much as for slaying the Qiongqi of legend.

"You can't kiss your enemies," Chang Liyan said, in a long-suffering tone.

"Watch me." Xue Chonghai puckered his lips at Wen Mao, looking utterly foolish and innocent, unlike a man who could go on to destroy a town much less thousands of lives. Save only for his conviction of his own invincibility. Wen Mao sighed, and kissed him on the cheek.

There was a hint of a pleased smile on Xue Chonghai's face before he made a show of pouting at his lover.

Chang Liyan sighed. "Wen Mao, with me. We're going to work on not overcorrecting that maneuver, so you don't faceplant into any bandits. Xue Chonghai, help the kids with their stances."

Xue Chonghai kissed Wen Mao in parting, longer this time, until a chorus of children's voices, distorted by their true source, rang out in discordant calls of *gross* and *shixiongs whyyyy*. There were no children visible; Xue Chonghai had not bothered to make them.

Wen Mao laughed into the kiss. "Teacher's pet," Xue Chonghai accused fondly as he pulled away.

"Shouldn't have sassed her," Wen Mao said. He spun Xue Chonghai around by the shoulders, smacked him on the ass, and sent him on his way.

The scene shifted, the sky darkening to a night without stars, the pigpen disappearing as walls constructed themselves.

Baoshan Sanren drove an ox-drawn cart laden down with brightly colored textiles into the courtyard of Chang Liyan's house on a night under a full moon. The house was near identical to the one in which her line would come to an end centuries later, if not for a few repairs and the shade of paint coating the walls.

"A newly minted immortal and still peddling your wares." Chang Liyan leaned back against a pillar. Xue Chonghai and Wen Mao sat on the steps at her feet, but Wen Mao leapt up at the word immortal to bow. Xue Chonghai rose more slowly, eying Baoshan Sanren warily as he made his own greeting.

"Don't spread that around, I'll have everyone asking for blessings instead of buying my blankets. But you look happy, the quiet life is treating you well." The textiles flickered, and Baoshan Sanren's mouth did not begin to move until the word blessings, its movement ending long after the words.

Wei Ying lurched back at the distortion of his grandmother, his stomach attempting to rebel though he'd been in the Burial Mounds long enough already there was nothing there but bile. Time seemed to pass differently within the confines of unending darkness, stretched and compressed all at once.

The flaws were a reminder, to Lan Wangji, that he had no way of knowing if this was the truth as Xue Chonghai's tattered soul remembered it, or a fabrication to gain sympathy. Wei Ying did not know, only watched with a sick fascination, his mind running through scenarios and possibilities at a dizzying rate, considering and discarding plans before Lan Wangji could grasp his train of thought.

And though they were bound together in the shared memory, the elder Wei Wuxian remained a mystery to him. His thoughts about the past lay buried beneath a roiling layer of anxiety directed at Lan Wangji himself.

"I look old." Chang Liyan said. A few more strands of gray emerged from her hair, crows' feet spread from the corners of her eyes, the skin around her mouth loosened, as the vision corrected for age. "Grown up kids, grown up disciples. Time marches on and not all of us plan to live forever. But yes, I'm happy. I'll be happier still when you take these troublemakers off my hands."

"Isn't the point of becoming rogue cultivators that we don't need a babysitter anymore?" Xue Chonghai asked.

“Chonghai!” Wen Mao scolded, and covered his lovers’ mouth with his hand, grinning nervously. Out of the corner of his mouth, he hissed, “You can lick my palm all you want, I’ve had that tongue worse places.”

Baoshan Sanren threw back her head and laughed, uninhibited and joyful in a way neither Lan Wangji nor Wei Ying had ever seen her. To Chang Liyan, she said, “I see what you mean. I’ll take them as far as Caiyi Town, see what I can teach them about the road.”

“With all due respect, Shifu, Madame, I am certain you have much wisdom from which we may benefit, but we have night hunting experience — Ow!” Wen Mao snatched his hand away from Xue Chonghai’s mouth, glaring at him.

Xue Chonghai rocked back on his heels, pleased with himself.

This, Wei Ying thought, was exactly the sort of insolence his waipo liked in her students. Had Xue Chonghai truly been so much like him? How, then, could his grandmothers trust that he could enter the Burial Mounds and walk out still himself? Despite all the research he’d done to prepare, he’d presented himself with more confidence than he possessed.

Lan Wangji wanted to reach out across the years and reassure him. He wanted to erase his knowledge of Wei Wuxian’s betrayal, so he could pretend his husband had not been forced into showing him this, so his sympathy would not have undertones of acrid distrust.

“Trips with a home to return to are very different from life on the road, and life in a town grateful to have resident cultivators. It doesn’t suit everyone.” Baoshan Sanren said. “Not forever, at least. You’ll do better with some tips to make sure your customers don’t skimp you.”

Xue Chonghai and Wen Mao exchanged a glance.

“It makes you uncomfortable to ask for direct payment,” She observed. “You’ll have to get over that — Liyan can’t fund your travels outside her territory. Gold doesn’t grow on trees.”

Chang Liyan had vanished from the scene, and Lan Wangji did not notice until she flickered back into being.

“Thank you for the opportunity, we’ll learn from your example,” Wen Mao bowed over his hands, the picture of genteel politeness.

Baoshan Sanren’s response took on an ominous cast as the scene began to fade out from under her. “So long as one of you does.”

By the time they arrived in Gusu, Baoshan Sanren had utterly won over both boys. Between them, Xue Chonghai was more adept at procuring payments, using witty humor to distract reluctant magistrates before returning to the subject. Wen Mao had more of a tendency to allow discounts, and Baoshan Sanren had mentioned offhand more than once that he was as casual about money as a sect leader, like her wife.

Though Xue Chonghai appeared comfortably oblivious, taking to the rogue cultivator lifestyle like a duck to water, it was clear the idea had taken root in Wen Mao.

Baoshan Sanren drove her cart directly to the base of the stairs to the Cloud Recesses, the vision skipping directly from the end of a previous night hunt to a less-weathered version of Lan Wangji's home.

"You're here!" Lan Yi, in the full regalia of a sect leader, ran down the final steps to throw herself into Baoshan Sanren's arms, kissing her soundly. "Excellent timing, we need to elope."

"Again, Niangzi? How many times is that now?" Baoshan Sanren wrapped an arm around Lan Yi's waist, holding her close and indulgently stroking her jaw.

"Seven. And we'll do it again until the Elders stop fighting me on every little thing." Lan Yi said, without shame. Without fear of the consequences. Lan Wangji abruptly remembered just how many of the disciplines had been added in the immediate aftermath of her leadership. No one ever said directly that she was the reason, but Lan Wangji could infer. "I think a week should do this time."

"A week? Hmm, I did hear about a haunting three villages back —"

"Niangzi."

"Yes?"

"I booked a room at the inn in Caiyi Town. We can talk about night hunts after we get reacquainted. I've missed you," Lan Yi said. And though Lan Wangji had been thinking of her as young, he realized with a start that she must be at least twice his age. An established sect leader, well on her way to cultivating to immortality, managing frequent separations from a wife history failed to record.

Baoshan Sanren's amusement faded, replaced with simple affection. "And I, you."

*Waipo and A-Ma never change*, Wei Ying thought.

It was so viscerally what Lan Wangji had wanted for himself, that the bolt of dark lighting that split through them seemed entirely fitting. The scene shattered, and for a moment, there was nothing but the writhing of ghosts, lit only by the two red points of Xue Chonghai's eyes.

The memories Wei Wuxian showed Lan Wangji skipped past all the time that he slept, through swaths of hours left alone as he tried to meditate through the screams of tortured souls, as he took his bone dizi and imbued it with resentment until it glistened like obsidian. As he sent his senses out into his surroundings, feeling out the connections between the ghosts composing each scene and their master.

As he learned the ways of the dead, and made them his own.

The pathways were familiar to Lan Wangji. He had felt them in Wei Wuxian on the rare occasions they cultivated intertwined in each others' meridians. Lan Wangji might have wondered, had he been less heartbroken, how Wei Wuxian intended him to use demonic cultivation to destroy the Yin Iron if he could not practice. Here was his answer, unasked for: Lan Wangji already knew how.

Yet it did not explain why Wei Wuxian had been so reluctant to let him practice in the one way he could, before Lan Wangji proved how much his cultivation had grown against the replica beast of the Burial Mounds. Why, when he was no more than a tool?

Unless Wei Wuxian had been trying to protect him, trying to find some, any other solution.

Or unless he had realized how much of him Lan Wangji could see with their cultivation intertwined.

Xue Chonghai stumbled upon the Xuanwu of Slaughter during a night hunt where he was separated from Wen Mao for a handful of days. The illusory Xue Chonghai climbed over boulders on a beach and found himself at the entrance of a cave. The cool air at the entrance held the coppery scent of blood.

The ghost of Xue Chonghai decided then to play at storytelling. "There were legends in those parts of an ancient beast slumbering in caves by the sea. I was curious if there was any truth to those rumors. So each night while I searched for the shark monster, I slept in a different cave. On the last night before Wen Mao slayed the shark, I found it."

Xue Chonghai entered the cave with a flickering talisman lighting the way. Sand squelched beneath his boots, though the tide did not reach so high. With each step, the ground tried harder to suck him down, keep him from going farther. In time, he entered a cavernous space, so suffused with resentment it was near impossible to make out anything. But there it was, the turtle — no, Lan Wangji corrected himself with a pang — *tortoise* that catalyzed his meeting with Wei Wuxian centuries later.

He had been taught Xue Chonghai created the Xuanwu of Slaughter.

But if the man himself was to be believed, he had merely been its master.

"It was more terrible than anything I had ever seen. The very rock around it was imbued with resentment and I knew I could not defeat it alone."

Taking one final look at the monster, Xue Chonghai spun toward the exit, but stopped short as he neared it, bending to pick up a rock from the ground.

"I took a souvenir with me to show Wen Mao, but by the time we met, the resentment had leaked from all but a few flecks of iron."

"You didn't tell him," Wei Ying said, without inflection.

“Of course not. Why share the greatest discovery of the century before I’d had a chance to learn more?” Xue Chonghai laughed, conducting the ghosts in their changing of scene.

But it wasn’t that, Lan Wangji could see it in the eyes of the young Xue Chonghai, even as he laughed and pulled his lover into the waves. The resentment that leaked from the rock had entered his meridians. Not much, but enough to make him a little more reckless, a little more secretive. To take his ambition and begin to twist it. And in the moment Xue Chonghai reunited with Wen Mao, splashing him only to be tackled into the seafoam left by a retreating wave, he had no idea.

Discomfort welled up in Lan Wangji’s chest, and it took a moment to realize it came from Wei Wuxian. The older Wei Wuxian. Something like... recognition, threaded through with guilt. But why would *this* make Wei Wuxian feel guilty? Wei Wuxian had never been dishonest about his cultivation.

Xue Chonghai flew on his sword through a densely wooded forest with Wen Mao balanced on the sword’s point, shooting sword flare after sword flare after a three-headed bird the size of a small horse with a snake’s tail. A still-living sheep was clasped in its beak, bleating in terror as the bird dodged and weaved through the branches.

From Lan Wangji’s perspective, it looked like the scenery was moving rather than the cultivators, and the trees were too close together for safe flying. A sheer rock face came into view, with doors for giants built into the rock. Carved into the doors were arrays in symbols so ancient Lan Wangji did not recognize them, nor did Wei Ying or Wei Wuxian. Sealed by cultivators of another age, perhaps by the first immortals, or even gods.

Anyone would have known not to disturb it.

*Anyone* did not preclude sword flares carelessly aimed by a confident young cultivator missing their target. The three-headed bird flew away, only a feather poorer, leaking resentment.

Wen Mao leapt onto his own sword in mid-air, intending to chase after the creature, but Xue Chonghai pulled him back. Above, the ghosts composing the bird dissolved into the flat gray sky, its relevance to Xue Chonghai’s tale at an end.

“It’s getting away!” Wen Mao protested.

“Did you not notice the mysterious ancient seal you destroyed?” Xue Chonghai threw his hands in the air. “Don’t you think we should try to reseal it, not chase after some bird that’s only interested in stealing sheep?”

A single rune was scored from an array, but it was enough. The doors creaked and groaned as they eased open, a crack wide enough for a single person of average size to slip through.

“Well.” Wen Mao said. “That can’t be good.” He flew up to the portion of the array he’d destroyed, attempting to decipher the weathered squiggles. “Some of this looks *almost*



decipherable, like a precursor to seal script, but the character's too obscured, and I couldn't begin to guess what it was. I doubt anyone alive could repair the damage."

"Shall we find out what we're dealing with then?" Xue Chonghai leapt down to the ground and poked the tip of his sword into the opening.

Rolling his eyes, Wen Mao joined him. "The things you drag me into, Chonghai."

"The things *I* drag you into? Whose sword flare is responsible for this again?" Even as he spoke, Xue Chonghai stepped within. Squeezing through after, Wen Mao knocked into Xue Chonghai with his shoulder, laughing.

His laughter cut off when Xue Chonghai used a light talisman to illuminate the space within, a cavern leading back into deeper darkness. The walls were carved with more of the same characters, but as the light hit them, they shimmered and changed, the lines rearranging themselves into jagged versions of the characters Lan Wangji knew.

"A translation array?" Xue Chonghai stepped closer to inspect the shifting characters. "Into a script the inscribers may not have known? I've never seen anything like it."

He read aloud:

*Here slumbers the Qiongqi, devourer of the righteous.*

*You who have broken our seal and disturbed him*

*If you are wicked, stay and be rewarded*

*If you are good, run, and you may have days left to live.*

"What is it with monsters and caves?" Wei Ying asked aloud, not expecting Xue Chonghai to answer.

But Xue Chonghai drew his shadows closer around himself, lending his face a more ghoulish cast. "There is no better place for bitterness and envy to fester and ferment."

"So dramatic," Wei Ying whispered to himself. The more time and energy Xue Chonghai spent attempting to intimidate Wei Ying, the less Wei Ying would fear him. Lan Wangji could have told him that.

"What was that?" Xue Chonghai darted across the scene as Wen Mao led the way deeper into the cavern, shoving his face close enough to Wei Ying that the particular hot, rancid smell of him overwhelmed the rot of the Burial Mounds.

Wei Ying choked a little, involuntarily, and it was enough for Xue Chonghai to draw back, satisfied at the effect of his gruesome nature. Wei Ying took the chance to pry for more information. "And no better place to confine it, too, I imagine. If monsters are naturally drawn there."

Wei Wuxian excelled at coaxing out details from his targets without giving his dearest secrets away in return. This was where he'd mastered the skill, Lan Wangji realized, as he buried his memories and feelings beneath layers, where Xue Chonghai would have difficulty unearthing them.

"Pay attention to what I have to teach you, child of my enemy." Xue Chonghai warned.

Wei Ying had the good sense not to say, *Who says what I'm learning is the same as what you want me to?* biting his lip to keep it in. But his lips were chapped from dehydration after days or weeks of inedia, and the skin tore easily. Blood welled up, and the hungry ghosts swept in.

Licking up the blood, Wei Ying brought Chenqing to his lips, and played a sharp, harsh scale. Nothing like the eerie melodies he would use to command the dead and call on ghosts even then taking form inside his head. But it was enough.

They scattered, and Xue Chonghai clapped his hands. A thunderous sound, despite the smoky wisps drifting from his hands. Wen Mao and Xue Chonghai's replicas were frozen behind him, a tunnel illuminated ahead. "Oh, well done, clever little master."

"If you want me to liberate you, letting them eat me seems counterproductive."

"On the contrary, you must handle them yourself, or you will not learn. And little one, don't think I'll be tricked by attempts to liberate me."

Wei Ying burned with the desire not to liberate, but to eliminate him, opening him to his surroundings and resentment flooded into him. Lan Wangji's mind squirmed at the sensation of cold, slime-like resentment creeping through Wei Ying's meridians. Though Wei Ying could not control it fully, not yet, he cordoned it off from his core just in time.

Xue Chonghai laughed and gestured for his ghostly puppet show to resume as Wei Ying glared up at him in defiance, lungs heaving.

The tunnel opened into a dimly lit natural cavern with dripping stalactites hanging from the cave ceiling, and matching stalagmites growing up from the floor. But despite the moisture, the chamber was lit by firelight, made hazy with steam.

Its source lay in the center of the chamber, a beautiful monster wrapped around the largest stalagmite.

History described the Qiongqi with a variety of appearances, a discrepancy the Lan attributed to the era's abundance of legendary monsters, and Wen Mao's unwillingness to chronicle his life, passing down only his precepts for cultivation. For Wei Ying's sake, Lan Wangji was grateful the Qiongqi was not a man with the head of a dog. Nor was it a winged ox with porcupine spines.

Larger than even the Xuanwu of Slaughter, the enormous tiger had a thick, lush coat and fangs the length of a sword. A wing of white feathers was draped over the Qiongqi's side, the other stretched out behind it. The flames crackled continuously, spewing forth from a line of vents along the Qiongqi's spine.

Xue Chonghai and Wen Mao should have been sweating from the heat, the vision did not recreate the effect. Xue Chonghai had forgotten the effects of temperature, Lan Wangji suspected.

The eye facing them opened, just a sliver, and the men stumbled back.

Yawning showed off its fangs and the razor-sharp teeth, numerous as a shark's that populated the rest of the Qiongqi's mouth. It slapped a paw against the cavern floor, and then, in the space of a blink, it was on its feet, its flames flaring like geysers.

Wen Mao grasped for the hilt of his sword and let it go with a hiss. There was a red welt across his hand when he shook it. "We should fight it outside, this thing could boil us alive in here."

"Is starting a forest fire any better?" Xue Chonghai asked. "We should at least try to keep it here. Think a cave-in would work?"

"I suspect not," Wen Mao said. "We need to learn its capabilities."

"Wen Mao!" Xue Chonghai pulled him out of the way of the Qiongqi's bite. It had lunged forward so quickly a moment's distraction had nearly been fatal. Thoroughly persuaded of the benefits of fleeing, Xue Chonghai pulled them both onto his sword and flew as fast as he could back down the tunnel, the Qiongqi bounding after. The scene glitched, skipping and speeding forward until Wen Mao and Xue Chonghai balanced in the branches of separate trees, sending sword flare after sword flare up at the Qiongqi, who had put its wings to use.

The Qiongqi's flames burnt through their sword flares like a forest fire consumed the dry twigs and leaves of the underbrush. But the forest itself did not catch, no matter how wildly the Qiongqi threw its flames. Its attacks focused on Wen Mao, showing a strong interest in the consumption of his head. Xue Chonghai was inconsequential. The exchange went on for some time, sped up, until the chance to learn the Qiongqi's ways handed itself to them.

It was the bad luck of a wandering monk that he was more virtuous, by the Qiongqi's standards, than either of them. One moment he was walking down the road, the next his head was swallowed down before either man could intervene.

Lan Wangji was not certain if it was Wei Ying or himself wondering if the Qiongqi preferred its meat charred.

Wen Mao, always the kinder of the two, retched dryly but Xue Chonghai had already come up with a more practical solution. "We should go while it's eating. We can find Baoshan Sanren together."

Wen Mao shook his head. "It would follow my trail, it's more interested in me. You'll have to go alone."

It seemed to Lan Wangji like Xue Chonghai had skipped over part of the conversation, either out of lack of interest, or because he had something to hide. But he remembered well the desperation of being ill-equipped to fight a legendary monster. And here, the echoes of panic

the Xuanwu of Slaughter had sown within him were so much more vivid, the smell of the Burial Mounds matching the turtle — *tortoise-snake's* — stench.

How many rotting bodies had Wei Ying buried in their cleansing?

“Wen Mao...” What Xue Chonghai might have said was interrupted by the Qionggi swooping down and trying to bite off Wen Mao’s head, forcing him to dodge. Again.

From a further distance, with the Qionggi between them, Wen Mao called out, “I’ll lead it on a chase. Don’t waste time, get the Lan Clan’s help!”

Seeing no other choice, Xue Chonghai looked back over his shoulder with tears in his eyes and flew away like an army of demons was on his heels.

Xue Chonghai did not go to the Lan clan. He flew hard and fast toward the coast, picked up a hunk of raw iron from a village blacksmith, and dismounted at the entrance to the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s then-residence.

“Simply permitting the iron to absorb resentment from its surroundings would have been insufficient.” Xue Chonghai’s lecturing tone reminded Lan Wangji horribly of Shufu’s. If Shufu were a ghost twisted by centuries of fermentation in a hell of his own making. “It would take hundreds of years to generate a fraction of the power of the Yin Iron. I needed a more direct approach.”

He watched through Wei Ying as Xue Chonghai climbed beneath the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s shell, where the juices and bones left by corpses long rotted away formed a swamp. Jin Zixuan had never shared precisely what it was like in there, and as the vision shifted to show what Xue Chonghai had seen, Lan Wangji understood why. He would not want to relive it, even to complain about the indignity.

Xue Chonghai plunged his sword into the meat at the base of the Xuanwu’s spine. The Xuanwu screamed and thrashed, sending Xue Chonghai crashing into its shell, and bathing him in ichor. Resentment poured from the wound. But he held fast to the hilt of his sword, and the iron in his other, drawing the resentment along a singular path. Gradually, the iron changed shape as more and more resentment was siphoned into it, though the time it took was condensed into what Lan Wangji estimated had been a matter of hours for Wei Ying, and minutes for him.

“I labored over the making of the Yin Iron for seventy-five days and nights, and by the end of it, I was more powerful than any immortal.” Xue Chonghai boasted, though Wei Ying scoffed under his breath.

Any one immortal on Earth, perhaps, by a measure of sheer destructive capability. But more powerful than immortals in heaven? And by whose measure was building bridges less powerful than tearing them down? One required skill, the other merely brute force.

“Did you know what directly manipulating resentment would do to your core?” Wei Ying asked.

Though the scene played on, the tattered ghost of Xue Chonghai flickered out of sight.

With his eyes glowing red for the first time, Xue Chonghai emerged from the metaphorical belly of the Xuanwu covered in dried ichor, and walked out into the waves until the crown of his head vanished beneath them.

The Xuanwu of Slaughter was his to command, and he bid it remain.

Down a sword, and no longer capable of wielding one, Xue Chonghai relied on the Yin Iron for transport. It transported him from one place to the next with a violence that left him retching, though there was nothing in his belly but bile. Without his core and without inedia, he was a wasted shell of himself.

Of course, Wen Mao and the Qiongqi were no longer where he’d left them. In the wreckage of the nearest town, he got a direction, and confirmation that a brave young man had been seen fighting it. That became a pattern, adapted only by the addition of other cultivators to the fight from several sects. Until finally —

The Qiongqi screeched with rage over an evacuated quarry that would one day become its namesake. Cultivators below tried every technique at their fingertips to no avail. Lan Yi had made her way there despite Xue Chonghai’s failure to retrieve her, but even her Chord Assassination, and her nets had little effect on the Qiongqi other than keeping it getting close enough to devour her from the head down.

Wen Mao reappeared on the scene, and Wei Ying’s interest sparked. Lan Wangji couldn’t quite tell why, with Wei Ying’s thoughts on the matter not yet fully formed. It wasn’t simply that he had gained the stature he was known for, leading all the cultivators on-scene save the Lan in formation.

Xue Chonghai walked out onto the battlefield, ignoring cries from the few who noticed him to get out of the way, and let the Yin Iron float into the air, filling him with its power. A hush fell over his surroundings. And the Qiongqi, intrigued, came to inspect him.

He was worthy of its attentions now, for the wrong reasons. But he did not have the chance to learn what his reward for wickedness would be for, seeing him there without a sword in hand, Wen Mao jumped in front of him, making himself a target.

Xue Chonghai grabbed him by the shoulder, and threw him back behind him.

“It’s been months, and you haven’t learned a thing,” he teased.

But the rejoinder he was hoping for never came.

“Chonghai, what *is* that?” Wen Mao looked fearfully up at the Yin Iron. The fear was not absent when he looked back at Xue Chonghai. “What happened to your eyes?”

For a moment, Xue Chonghai was torn between bristling and dismay at his reaction, but he stiffened. “Just be ready.”

Wen Mao nodded, shifting in a ready stance.

Raising his arms above his head, Xue Chonghai used the Yin Iron to take hold of the Qiongqi’s resentment, pulling it out of its body as it jerked this way and that in the air to form a cloud of dark smoke. It hit the ground and rolled. Once, twice, thrice, and lay still, whimpering. The flames along its back guttered and, as if a giant’s iron pan had been placed over it, they went out.

That wasn’t the end. The Qiongqi pushed itself to its feet and roared, charging blindly. It tore the head from the first cultivator it saw, and Xue Chonghai could do nothing, absorbed with keeping the Qiongqi’s flames repressed. More heads, and it would grow more powerful, until he could no longer hold it. Already, sweat poured down his face.

But Wen Mao leaped onto its back, ignoring the risk of the flame vents. Still trusting enough in his lover, despite his visibly changed nature, to risk immolation. The Qiongqi tried to buck him off, but Wen Mao grabbed hold of its fur, and plunged his sword into the soft flesh beneath the Qiongqi’s flame vents.

It was a death blow.

The Qiongqi collapsed to the ground.

And Wen Mao approached the disciples he’d gathered during his eighty-one-day fight before he turned to Xue Chonghai, gathered him in his arms, and demanded to know what had happened to him.

“The story of how Wen Mao slew the Qiongqi has been told over and over again, but the part no one ever knew is that Wen Mao woke the Qiongqi.” Xue Chonghai said from the shadows, not yet recovered enough from Wei Ying’s simple barb to show his face. “I never told, even once we were enemies. Nor did they tell of how I smothered the Qiongqi’s flames and rendered it vulnerable, and Wen Mao did not correct them.”

Then he did emerge, floating back and forth like pacing, though there was a little less substance to his soul than there had been before. “Wen Mao struck the final blow. Wen Mao won the acclaim. Of course, once I was the more powerful between us, he turned on me. Couldn’t give me a share of his success, could he?”

That wasn’t the way it was taught. Gusu Lan, which often oversimplified historical conflicts to their core moral teachings, taught that Xue Chonghai had been as, if not more, respected than Wen Mao in his day. He’d *chosen* to retreat to near seclusion with a handful of disciples. Even now, it was the mystery of how Xue Chonghai went from respected sage to crazed murderer that made him such a towering figure. The horror that even the most respected of cultivators could stray into darkest shadow.

It was not an immediate falling out, a fact Lan Wangji gathered only from context. Both men filled out from one scene to the next, transforming from lanky youths to brick-like men. They stood in a private receiving room, richly decorated in the colors Wen Mao must have recently chosen for his own.

It couldn't be a coincidence, Lan Wangji thought, that Wen Mao had chosen red and black after the now omnipresent color of Xue Chonghai's eyes, and the resentment that ringed him. It was not lost on Wei Ying either.

It did not matter to Xue Chonghai. All that mattered was that this was not *his* dream for their future. "You're founding a sect? But we were supposed to —"

"Stay with me, be my husband," Wen Mao grabbed his hands, but Xue Chonghai snatched them away.

"You just want me to give up the Yin Iron."

"Of course I do, it's tearing you apart!" He turned away, throwing up his arms, before turning back, pleading. "But Chonghai, I want to marry you."

"Marry me?" Xue Chonghai laughed. The sound was bitter, but still his own. Or at least, the laugh his ghost remembered having when he was alive. "You're the virtuous one, the one the Qiongqi wanted badly enough it bypassed entire towns to chase after. The most righteous man in the Cultivation World, always willing to do a good deed for nothing in return. I'm just tainted. The Qiongqi knew it, so why don't you?"

"The judgment of a monster means nothing to me! Why does it matter so much to you? Chonghai..." Wen Mao reached out to cup his cheek, and despite knowing the outcome, for a moment Lan Wangji hoped he might get through to him. "You made that *device* to save everyone, but you don't need it now."

"I made the Yin Iron to save *you* ." Xue Chonghai snapped, his eyes flaring the red of a burning ember. "But I won't make myself powerless just to sit by your side."

He did not wait for Wen Mao to reply. The Yin Iron simply stole him away.

Years passed, and Xue Chonghai built a life for himself in the cave where the Yin Iron took him. It was simpler, perhaps, than the Yin Iron wished for him, but it was patient. The voices of souls trapped within whispered to him constantly, with new ones added each time he night hunted. The monsters and hungry ghosts were not the worst of it. For he could no longer liberate the dead, only absorb them. The guilt ate away at him more surely than any evil.

Students came to him in small numbers, and though he knew teaching them to manipulate resentment would destroy them, they were his only solace.

Wen Mao appeared in snippets, over and over. The Wen Sect grew, and Wen Mao fell in love a second time. He got married, had children.

Xue Chonghai showed very little to him of the children.

Nightless City was under construction, but already, disciples practiced their forms on the same stone courtyard where their last leader would meet his final end.

His brief interactions with Xue Chonghai grew increasingly bitter, and Lan Wangji slowly realized what had drawn Wei Ying's attention. Where the other figures and scenery were composed of bits of decomposing souls, Wen Mao was built from a single ghost every time.

A single ghost, more intact than any other.

Xue Chonghai's downward spiral was slow, but inevitable. He was no Wen Ruohan hungering for infinite power even before his corruption, but neither was he Wei Ying, Wei Wuxian ceaselessly innovating in a bid to make a better future.

Lan Wangji caught himself thinking of his husband as he was accustomed to, and forced his focus back to the vision.

One by one, Xue Chonghai's students met their fates. Leaving of their own devices or trying to steal the Yin Iron made no difference — all died bloody in the end. Until, finally, he was left alone with the souls of the resentful dead. A lover left too, taking Xue Chonghai's infant son along.

Finally, he sat alone in the Demon-Slaughtering Cave with the voices. Stewing in his misery, resisting the Yin Iron's power with the scraps of sanity he had left. Fading away with his surroundings, until there was only the darkness left.

"Wait, that's it?" Wei Wuxian asked, when it was clear no new scene would take form.

"You know all you need to, now. I suggest you get to work." The gong-like sound of Xue Chonghai clapping rang out again, only this time, it was clear the sound was composed of the coordinated moans of ghosts.

Wei Ying *had* been working — but not on what Xue Chonghai would have liked him to. He had learned to keep out the voices he did not choose to hear. He had kept a hold on the intact ghost, and followed it now, as it swirled round and round the Burial Mounds.

Raising Chenqing to his lips, Wei Ying played a gentle, coaxing tune. A single soul separated from the masses, slowly taking on color and form, like it was an effort, without Xue Chonghai's control to aid him.

"If you're going to show him this, why not show him how you murdered my family?" Wen Mao was a shadow of the form Xue Chonghai had forced him to take, white-haired and drained of color, worn down to the essentials of continued existence. But he had clung onto all his limbs through the centuries. And the only resentment about him was not his own, but shackles binding his wrists and ankles, clinking like real metal as he moved.



Xue Chonghai scoffed. “You made more. Though it seems this latest scion of yours is more like me than you — the ghosts have told me such interesting things.”

“I would rather end my line myself than see it so twisted.” Wen Mao said, utterly calm, perhaps even bored. “As I have told you the last fifty times you brought it up to torture me.”

Xue Chonghai frowned. “That can’t be right. You should be much more horrified.”

“If you want him to free you, does the boy not deserve the whole story?” Wen Mao said, as if Xue Chonghai hadn’t spoken. “Show him you hated me for moving on after you broke off not only our relationship, but our civility. Show him how you controlled the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s rampage across the land. Show him, if you’re not a coward.”

“Why don’t you show me what happened?” Wei Ying asked, challenging. “If you’re so certain I’ll free you, there should be no risk.”

“Very well.” Xue Chonghai raised his hands, and the stage formed again.

Lan Wangji did not want to watch, but it was not up to him. There was Wen Mao finding his family’s dismembered remains in the rooms he had never barred Xue Chonghai from, the first victims of his rampage, a thin disk imprinted with the symbols of the Yin Iron left as a calling card. The Xuanwu of Slaughter rising from its cave and tearing across the countryside, gorging itself on everything made of meat, human or animal, that crossed its path.

He thought Wei Wuxian might have skipped through the other horrific images, the towns laid waste by the Xuanwu of Slaughter under Xue Chonghai’s command, so he caught no more than a glimpse of half-eaten corpses. Cultivators fell before it, one after the next, until they stopped coming on their own. He did not think it was Wei Wuxian trying to protect him unnecessarily, but simply trying to skip through details before empathy became unsafe.

And maybe, because *he* did not want to relive the graphic images imprinted on his youthful mind.

Cultivators traveled to join Wen Mao at Nightless City, trusting him to lead them against another eldritch monster and its master, but when they set out to follow the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s trail, it had vanished as though it had never been. After weeks of futile searching, they marched against the Demon-Slaughtering Cave. The Burial Mounds, soon to earn their name.

“And we’ve come full circle.” Wei Ying dusted off his knees and began to push himself to his feet. “I believe I’ve learned all I need.”

“Not quite,” Wen Mao said. “Would you be able to direct me in sharing a memory?”

Wei Ying hesitated. “I’m not certain. If the ghosts can consent, I believe so.”

So concerned with the consent of ghosts, and yet he had not thought to give his husband an informed choice.

Wen Mao tilted his head, listening to the voices Wei Ying had blocked out. “If you promise to free them, they will.”

“In that case,” Wei Ying raised Chenqing, and began to play, channeling through Wen Mao in a unique form of Empathy made manifest.

It was not Wen Mao who took form, however, but Xue Chonghai. Red-eyed, ragged, and turning against his own beast, against the will of the Yin Iron. He screamed, and coughed up blood, but the Xuanwu trundled its way into the cave at Muxi Mountain, and entered an early hibernation. The Yin Iron took hold of Xue Chonghai, and he flickered in and out of sight before disappearing entirely.

Wei Ying’s playing cut off in a discordant note, and the ghosts dispersed. Not back to the borders of the Burial Mounds, but to what came next.

He had, for the first time, used Demonic Cultivation to cleanse and liberate.

“And so, with the last shreds of his sanity, Xue Chonghai confined the Xuanwu of Slaughter to its cave.” Wen Mao offered him a gravity Xue Chonghai did not offer him in return.

Xue Chonghai looked perplexed. “I don’t remember that.”

“You wouldn’t. You used to taunt me with the knowledge that the man I once loved was still in you when I killed you. But it pained you more than me, so you decided to erase it. You erased so many things you turned your memory to pumice.”

“You traitor, you, you —” Xue Chonghai cut off in a shriek. Confronted with the truth, he joined the other hungry ghosts in circling the Burial Mounds.

Wen Mao sighed, and spoke to the place his once-lover had been. “I didn’t. If only you could remember.”

“So,” Wei Ying said. “Anything you can tell me that would help me defeat him and cleanse this place?”

“On my hundredth birthday, I handed the role of sect leader over to my eldest surviving child, and returned to the Burial Mounds,” Wen Mao explained. “It was my intention to cleanse them, and perhaps to liberate him, but I failed. Now I am merely an unwanted guest, but I may have learned a few things in the last few hundred years of... involuntary co-habitation.”

“Torture,” Wei Ying said, blithe as anything.

“As you say.” Wen Mao grimaced at his bluntness. “Will you free me from it?”

Wei Ying considered, and raised Chenqing back to his lips, feeling out the construction of Wen Mao’s shackles with each note. After a few tries, the shackles fractured, and dissipated to mist.

“Xue Chonghai is connected to all the pieces of Yin Iron, as their creator, even past death. They are built from more than him, and so he needs the right wielder to make himself known as more than one whisper among many.”

Wei Ying frowned, but of course he put it together quickly. He had not stopped being brilliant simply because La Wangji was furious with his older self. “The baby his lover fled with. A blood connection?”

“The mother left his son with Chang Liyan, but as he grew, he could not stand the stigma placed on him by his father’s name, and chose to leave. I had no idea the line survived, until recently.” Wen Mao’s frown was half disgust and half pity. “There’s a boy, Xue Chonghai’s last descendant, who was recently picked up from the streets by Wen Ruohan’s right hand man. He speaks to this Xue Yang through the Iron.”

It was something about Xue Yang that Lan Wangji had been trying to recall lately. His missing body, when Lan Wangji came upon the scene shortly after Wei Wuxian killed him — that was it. But then how, if Xue Yang was truly dead, his soul destroyed, as Wei Wuxian claimed, was a demonic cultivator with the family name *Xue* involved with Jin Guangshan?

Wei Ying, in another time, took an entirely different message from the same statement. “If he’s connected to the Yin Iron, why isn’t he inhabiting it? Unless he’s also bound here, by his death.”

“Precisely.” Wen Mao clasped his arms behind his back. A mannerism, however much he might have liked to deny it, that he shared with Xue Chonghai. “And that is all you need to know to eliminate him.”

“Uh. Are you certain?”

Lan Wangji felt the stretching of Wei Ying’s facial muscles as he raised a brow, doubtful.

Wen Mao, it seemed, did not only have a tendency to overlook questioning when it was his enemy asking. “It’s fortunate you appeared now. I could not have held on much longer before my soul was too damaged for reincarnation.”

“Would you have stayed for him?”

“No,” Wen Mao replied this time, certain. “I would not give up the chance to find my partners again in my next life for him. Not anymore. Not when there is nothing left to save.”

“Good.” Wei Ying said with certainty — and yet.

“You’re young. You might not find it so easy to say so when you’re my age. It took far longer than I would like to admit to give up on him.” There was still, perhaps, a bit of mourning in Wen Mao’s bearing. But he was unshaken.

It would take Lan Wangji far longer than he would like to admit to stop hoping Wei Ying would look at him the way Lan Wangji looked at Wei Ying.

Wei Ying scoffed, but Lan Wangji thought he understood. Though he was not so good as most at showing it, he wanted to rage and scream and rail against Wei Wuxian, and yet he would still walk through every known and unknown hell to save him.

“You’re a hundred-year-old man turned five-hundred-year-old ghost. What do you know about me?”

“You —” Wen Mao chuckled. “I’d forgotten what kids are like, but I’ll be one soon enough.”

He began to fade then, his form rapidly becoming transparent. Lan Wangji had never seen a ghost so ready to leave. Five hundred years was a long time to stubbornly stick around in the dark without something to live for. Wen Mao was made of a stern fabric, he thought, but even so, he was likely far less stable than he presented himself.

“Sure.” Wei Ying said. “One last question before you go. How do I destroy the Yin Iron?”

Wen Mao shrugged, already more than half faded away. “Kid, I have no idea. Ask your grandmother.”

“Which one????” He called into the darkness, but there was no answer. There would be none. Wen Mao was no more.

And with his leave-taking came Xue Chonghai’s return. He dove down from above, howling, “WHERE DID HE GO????” Resentment wrapped around him, lending him the strength of a battering ram as he angled straight for Wei Ying.

Was part of Xue Chonghai’s outburst grief at the final loss of his former lover and closest friend? Or was he simply outraged at a toy being taken away?

“You blamed him for your choices for the last time. And I will not set you free.” Wei Ying was done catering to the whims of what was, at his core, just an unusually powerful hungry ghost. He began to play a harsh yet lilting melody that was not yet quite what he would use on the battlefields of the Sunshot Campaign, but pushed the resentment out from around him, leaving him in a small, clear pocket with the gray stone floor revealed, and heading Xue Chonghai off in his attack.

With each note, Wei Ying tore at Xue Chonghai’s soul. For an entire length of the song there was no change, but Wei Ying was young and hale, and Xue Chonghai a weathered old ghost. A thread came loose, and he tugged on it, imagining it wrapping around a spool as Xue Chonghai unraveled. Many of the hungry ghosts joined in, swarming for the chance to sink their incorporeal teeth into what remained of him.

Monsters, unseen while Xue Chonghai wanted something of Wei Ying, made of unlucky deer and sparrows sprang and pecked at the edges of Wei Ying’s boundary. But after a few rounds of attacks, they inevitably collapsed.

Lan Wangji finally understood — Wei Ying used the music to channel the resentment through himself without stagnating in his core until it became a habit that he no longer strictly needed

the crutch for, but the permission he asked for was just as important. Resentment could not infect and alter him so long as he did not give it an opening by using force.

Wei Ying unraveled Xue Chonghai's soul piece by piece, until the hungry ghosts obscured him entirely from view. Abruptly, they changed course and scattered to the boundaries of the Burial Mounds, leaving nothing in their wake.

Xue Chonghai was gone, but Wei Ying was not certain he had finished the job.

Without Xue Chonghai, the task of clearing the Burial Mounds was only a matter of time. Wei Wuxian had much to learn of his cultivation, but there was no need to practice inedia. He made periodic trips into town, picking up supplies and leaving them just outside the ring of darkness. The townspeople pretended not to know he was the one responsible for the changes to the Burial Mounds at first, but then he raised his first fierce corpse, and he was not permitted to pay for another thing in Yiling until he started to pay salaries years later.

The mass of hungry ghosts shrunk everyday, an incremental process, but one marked by the lights playing in the sky overhead with each departing soul, leaving behind piles of bone and bodies in various stages of rot that Wei Ying had bury each other. All told, it took three months to master demonic cultivation, a year to clear the Burial Mounds. It would take lifetimes to convince the people of Yiling he was a person, and not an oddly friendly, pamperable god.

Until, one day, the air was clear, and the first bird landed on a barren branch.

Wei Ying returned to the mountain. He was nervous as he pressed his token to the tree with deep roots, despite what he'd told his grandmothers five years earlier, that he had changed too much for Baoshan Sanren's wards to admit him. But the iridescent portal appeared before him, and he stepped through to the embraces that awaited him.

Scribbling in his notebook at his desk in his cottage on the mountain, a knotting board discarded on the floor, Wei Ying grew into himself with every moment. The years slid by as he formulated and discarded theories on how to disconnect Lan Yi from the Yin Iron. He included observations on precisely how the attempts had been ineffective every time.

When he looked as he did in the present—in early twenties and yet ageless—Lan Yi entered his cottage leaning heavily on a walking stick. Wei Wuxian rose quickly and offered her his seat.

She took it, and also the opportunity to look through his notes despite his protests that they weren't ready. "Your theory of how to destroy the Yin Iron without a deadly backlash is the only one that might work."

"A-Ma, don't say *that*. Wen Qing is still looking for the locations of the missing pieces, and no leads on who might function as my opposite."

“About that.” Lan Yi grimaced. “I expect my deterioration will speed up in short order —”

“A-Ma!”

“Because the part of my soul I left with the Yin Iron has returned. She is laden with resentment, and seems to have been operating under the assumption that we were dead. She let a little Lan heir make off with the Yin Iron and faded away, only to wind up here.” Lan Yi sighed. “The piece of me that’s spent half a millennia contemplating our mistakes instead of living is now within me, and I can’t say I much like it.”

“A-Ma, don’t make jokes about that!” This, despite the fact that Wei Wuxian had clearly gotten his morbid sense of humor from her.

“My A-Xian left me worrying for months while he traipsed off to face down evil, revolutionize cultivation, and make pretty lights in the sky. I’ll make whatever jokes I want.” She poked his nose, and he scrunched it dutifully. “But back to the point. The Lan boy – Lan Wangji – he’s the one you’re looking for. I haven’t met a young cultivator with so much potential in a very long time. Save for my little troublemaker, of course.”

Wei Ying plopped himself on the floor by her feet, pouting. “Why did it have to be a Lan?”

"Do you mean something like that?" Lan Yi said, and only continued when Wei Ying started to protest that no, he didn't. "No, I suspect it will be difficult to persuade him to help, given his upbringing and what your plan requires of him. You'll want to be careful how you ask him."

Lan Wangji noted that Lan Yi had *not* told Wei Wuxian not to talk to him at all. But that was how Wei Wuxian took her words. "Right."

"Lan Wangji's piece of Yin Iron will point out the others," Lan Yi added. "Wen Chao is searching for the other pieces — you must get there first."

Wei Wuxian had not, of course, gotten there first, nor had Lan Wangji managed to keep the piece from the Cold Pond Cave. No more than Wei Wuxian had stopped Xue Yang's body from getting up and walking away, even after he had destroyed his soul.

The Empathy skipped to Wei Wuxian, Wen Qing, Xiao Xingchen, and a very alive Song Lan standing in a forest. Song Lan held a bag that shook and glowed blue, just as the piece Lan Wangji had once carried did near the other pieces.

“It’s so insistent that the piece is here. Unless it’s buried, there’s nothing here.” Wen Qing complained.

“Not buried.” Wei Wuxian pointed out the hidden entrance to a cave. “But I suspect it is underground.”

Lan Wangji did not get to see him defeat the Xuanwu of Slaughter. And perhaps that was for the best. A reminder of how heroic Wei Wuxian could be, when he chose, was the last thing he needed.

Instead, Wei Wuxian's cottage materialized once again. A pallet was made up on the floor, and Lan Wangji rested on the bed, pale and drawn with his hair spread out around him.

He watched as Wei Wuxian walked up to the phantom of himself, lying prone in bed, hesitantly reaching out to brush his cheek with the back of his knuckles, before taking Lan Wangji's wrist in his hand. "I didn't know your name until A-Ma told me. I didn't know who you were before I saved you."

Though his words were meant for Lan Wangji, Wei Wuxian looked at the facsimile as he spoke. A version of Lan Wangji that did not yet know him, that would soon fall head over heels for him without a hint of restraint.

He could not stand to look at that innocent version of himself a moment more. He needed out, immediately. He knew, intellectually, that removing himself from Empathy without the assistance of an anchor was a terrible idea. But he did it anyway.

Wei Ying's eyes went wide, looking right at him even within Empathy, but only as he vanished. "No, Lan Zhan, you can't —"

Everything went dark.

He woke with his head pillowed on a surface of uneven softness, the hard floor digging into his right hip. A lap. Wei Ying's?

He hummed, starting to slip back down into dreams — and a moment later, Lan Wangji shot upwards, his forehead banging hard into Wei Wuxian's chin. It only exacerbated the headache already building behind his eyes.

Wei Wuxian yelped, and Lan Wangji quickly put distance between them, settling on his knees. A wave of nausea sent bile burning up into his throat, and he only barely managed to swallow it down.

"Did you think everything between us has been solved?" He demanded, furious that Wei Wuxian thought he had the right to touch him after *that*.

"No, no, you ripped yourself out of Empathy too quickly. I had to help you find your way back to your body." Wei Wuxian hurried to explain. "It required contact. It's my fault, I'm sorry. I should have ended the Empathy with seeing you in the cave."

His emotions were a whirlpool, draining him, drowning him. The logical response was, "I see," but he did not feel it.

"You know everything I do now." Wei Wuxian said. "I have only one secret left."

Lan Wangji did not see what could possibly be left to tell, what could possibly make this worse. “And that is?”

“When Mianmian told me who you were, I could barely believe it.” Wei Wuxian began, a seeming non sequitur. Lan Wangji used to find his roundabout way of explaining things charming.

Now he was just tired.

“The person I needed to win over, and he fell right into my lap. But then you were so beautiful, so enchanting, so delightfully easy to fluster. The match I never knew I needed in so many more ways than simply power. You’re kind to children and those in need, unafraid of refusing to give the powerful the time of day. You brought a spring thaw to my heart when I’d been a single-minded winter storm, tearing myself apart in pursuit of my goals, for so long. How could I help falling in love with you?” Wei Wuxian smiled sadly, and it could be intended only as a goodbye.

Lan Wangji could do nothing but stare at him.

“I love you, Lan Zhan,” Wei Wuxian said. Like he had to, now that he’d started. Like he believed it.

How long had he been waiting to hear those words from his husband? But they were much more than a simple confession, and the truth was crushing. The knowledge that he had not been alone in his delusions did not make it easier. “I will help you destroy the Yin Iron, as I promised.”

Wei Wuxian moved forward on his knees, hands out in placation. “Thank you, Lan Zhan, I —”

“Stop calling me that.” He burst out. There could be nothing personal between them anymore. He still cared. About Wei Wuxian, not just the Cultivation World, but it was no longer something he could acknowledge to himself without breaking. “Any feelings you have for me... they aren’t real.”

Wei Wuxian gaped, for a long moment, long enough for Lan Wangji to gather the energy to stand. But before he could, Wei Wuxian shook out of his stupor, and began to ramble.

“What? No. I don’t expect you to forgive me, I’m infinitely grateful that you’re willing to help, for the sake of the world if not A-Ma. But I know my own heart. I deserve to have you stomp on it, but it’s mine. And I love you, even if it means letting you g—”

“You were always ready to let me go.” Lan Wangji got to his feet, cutting him off. “You built all of your hopes on me. These feelings come from those hopes, nothing more. If you planned to fight for me, if you believed we had a chance at a future, you would have found a way to trust me with this. I gave you everything, and you broke my heart. That is why I can’t believe you love me.”



He tore the decorative knot with its protective talisman from his belt, the first thing Wei Ying ever gave him, and threw it to the ground.

Lan Wangji walked out the door without a backward glance.

He was at the base of the Burial Mounds trail when he realized where Xue Chonghai's soul had gone, and halfway back up when he heard the screams.

## Chapter End Notes

Things will improve for Wangxian from here I promise 🥰

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 23

## Chapter Summary

There's an intruder in the Burial Mounds, Lan Yi did not raise her grandson to tell lies, and everyone is conspiring against Wei Wuxian.

## Chapter Notes

This chapter and probably the rest will be unbetaed due to busy lives and me wanting to get the rest of the fic out by the end of the year. Which is very possible, because as of last night, I have a complete draft!

**CW:** Major character injury

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Wangji thought about running to the Cloud Recesses and sending an abrupt letter that he would return when it was time to destroy the Yin Iron, but dismissed the thought after only a moment. He would rent a place in town and think on what to do after he had tried — and more than likely failed — to get some rest. He couldn't stand the idea of his brother deciding he had been right.

Because he wasn't.

Wei Wuxian was not his. But he *was* good.

Even the best of people could make unforgivable mistakes in the pursuit of what was right.

It was never *desirable* to eliminate ghosts, for instance, but even the Lan's principles admitted there was no choice when liberation and suppression had failed. They would *not* have approved of Wei Wuxian allowing the victims of Xue Chonghai and Xue Yang to tear their souls apart en route to liberation. Lan Wangji had grown flexible enough in his morality to find it equitable.

Lan Wangji had had little time to contemplate the implications of Xue Yang's missing body in the middle of Empathy, with so much information piled on the heels of that revelation. But now it was the distraction he needed, the only thing that might be strong enough to take his mind off of Wei Wuxian.

First, the trail of bloody footprints had looked as though Xue Yang's body had gotten up and walked away. But corpses did not simply walk away without a force to return them to motion, and Lan Wangji had accounted for the ghosts of all the Chang Clan's servants.

Second, the bodies drained of qi found all across the Cultivation World except Yiling in recent months, concurrent with rashes of fierce corpses in numbers far too high to be natural. How every time a visitor called Xue called on Jin Guangshan at midnight, a servant of Lanling Jin was likewise drained, though not always to death. How the disciples guarding the Yin Iron had been found that way too, casting suspicion of the theft on Wei Wuxian.

Nie Huaisang had brought up the possibility of that the culprit was a jiangshi when he and Mianmian visited the Burial Mounds. They had all dismissed it as too unlikely, due to the rotting appearance and stiffness of a standard jiangshi, but Wei Wuxian had mentioned a clever demonic cultivator might be able to mask it. Could one also prevent rigor and rot from taking hold if they possessed the body immediately after death?

Third, the missing part of Lan Yi's soul had returned once Lan Wangji took custody of her Yin Iron, but it had not released its hold on her. He had spoken to a fully cognizant version of her that resided in the Yin Iron for centuries.

Xue Yang himself could not have resurrected as a jiangshi. Even if a fragment of him remained in the Yin Iron, it could not have accepted his death, the loss of the rest of his soul, and gathered enough power to leap back into his body before Wei Wuxian confiscated his piece.

But there was another man with the family name Xue who would only have needed to snatch up a convenient vessel.

Having reached the base of the Burial Mounds, Lan Wangji turned on his heel and started back up.

The screaming was still some distance off when Lan Wangji stumbled into a bigger problem. In his hurry to get back to the Burial Mounds, he only found the body because his foot caught on an ankle sticking out from the underbrush, and he nearly landed on his face.

With a sinking heart, Lan Wangji moved aside the underbrush that had been used to conceal the body, and found a face he recognized. Not friend or family, but a woman whose safety he was responsible for all the same.

The victim was a middle-aged farmer, one of the refugees from Qishan that Lan Wangji had brought here himself, with the promise of a new home free of persecution. Her body had gone cold, and not a scrap of qi lingered.

If Lan Wangji was correct, and Xue Chonghai had prevented his stolen body's rigor, not even Wei Wuxian could have sensed him while full of freshly harvested qi. Xue Chonghai had been in the Burial Mounds for hours, preparing to make his move even while Empathy showed Lan Wangji his history.

With a whispered promise to see to her burial properly later, Lan Wangji sprinted onward. His realization now all the more urgent.

As he got closer, a flood of townspeople washed toward him, their faces panicked. Lan Wangji stepped off the path, forcing himself to run even faster for the banquet hall.

Within, the tables had been overturned to form a blockade, the disciples of Yiling Wei in a ring within it, the remains of the feast scattered across the floor. Behind the perimeter of disciples, the remainder of the townspeople had their backs pressed to the walls. An Yulun was coaxing them, a few at a time, to flee out the door.

Xiao Xingchen was there too, clutching his side, where his wound had reopened, too weak to fight back against even little A-Qing's efforts to hold him back. But not too weak to make it difficult for one of the doctor's disciples to access his wound. Wen Qing couldn't tend to him herself, because she lay unconscious with a gash in her forehead, a pair of her formerly Jin disciples tending to her.

Xue Chonghai had not revealed himself. The source of the disturbance was Song Lan, returned to his mindless state.

A distraction.

And one only possible because Wei Wuxian had delayed dealing with Song Lan's connection to the thief, to *Xue Chonghai*, to tell Lan Wangji the truth. Lan Wangji could not regret the knowledge, yet if he had only asked as soon as he began to suspect —

But no, he should not have had to ask.

Song Lan swung his sword wildly, slashing at any disciple who came near him, fresh talismans hanging off him. Wei Wuxian dashed in and attached two more as a pair of disciples held off an overhead swing. He danced back as Song Lan disengaged and swung at him. As he did, Wei Wuxian caught sight of Lan Wangji.

He would have let the blow land, if Lan Wangji hadn't thrown Bichen, and knocked it and Song Lan away. But he did flinch at the sight of Lan Wangji's sword flying toward him, like he thought Lan Wangji might be there to kill him.

How *dare* Wei Wuxian think so little of him, even for an instant?

Wei Wuxian shook off his shock before Lan Wangji did and called across the room, the disciples holding off Song Lan between them. "I don't know how this is happening! I can't feel anything wrong within the wards, but Song Lan couldn't have just reverted on his own."

Bichen returned to his hand, and Lan Wangji gripped its hilt hard, relying on the familiar weight to keep him steady. He wasn't ready to deal with Wei Wuxian's eyes on him, looking at him like he was equally heartbroken and yet like their marriage was already a ghost of his past. Lan Wangji could not bear it.

He could not bear to take the first step closer either.

“You would not sense anything. The thief is Xue Chonghai.” Lan Wangji could not wait for the implications to sink in, “You did not destroy him completely, his connection to the Yin Iron must have let part of his spirit escape. When you killed Xue Yang, he—”

“He’s a jiangshi! Shit, Nie Huaisang was right.” Wei Wuxian leapt over the heads of the disciples and Song Lan, landing only an arm’s length away.

Unbalanced, Lan Wangji instinctively fell back into old habits, teasing him. “Shocking, I realize.”

Wei Wuxian’s answering grin froze as quickly as it formed, and not just because he noticed their unwelcome proximity. “The Yin Iron, fuck! A-Ma —” He glanced back at Song Lan, and the remaining frightened faces. The disciples could not subdue Song Lan without destroying him, perhaps not at all, but Lan Wangji was not at all certain he could keep Xue Chonghai from the Yin Iron on his own.

“Finish subduing Song Lan quickly,” he said, already turning to go. “I will buy time.”

“I trust you, Lan Wangji.” Wei Wuxian called after him. “I’ll be right behind you.”

That name in Wei Wuxian’s voice sent a pang through his chest, though he had asked him to use it. A contradiction Lan Wangji would have to learn to live with if he intend their lives to be separate henceforth.

Another body lay outside the cave of the Yin Iron, one of the construction workers, a man who always had a kind word for everyone. If only Lan Wangji had realized the significance of Xue Yang’s missing body earlier. This man, the woman on the path, Song Lan, and perhaps many others along Xue Chonghai’s trail of devastation might still be alive.

A golden light shone from the back of the caves, so Xue Chonghai had not yet managed to disrupt Wei Wuxian’s array. He hurried towards it, sheathing Bichen along the way as he recognized that a mere sword would have no chance against the creator of the Yin Iron. But he’d shown vulnerability to music before, and so Lan Wangji summoned his guqin.

A figure in dark robes knelt before the array. Xue Chonghai, tracing the characters with his fingers.

Lan Wangji quickly playing a net into existence to drag Xue Chonghai back from the array. It settled over him and tightened, but Lan Wangji only managed to force him back a few steps before the net dissipated. Crouched on one knee, the thief looked up. His eyes burned like red lanterns on a moonless night, and for a moment, Lan Wangji could see nothing else.

Even as he blinked to clear his eyes, his fingers moved into position for a new chord on the strings. But the thief knelt there, studying him, and so Lan Wangji took his measure in turn.

To all accounts, Xue Yang had been a slight man with a cruel, childish glee to his smile. Not much had changed, in death. If Lan Wangji had not seen those eyes in a different face, he might have thought Wei Wuxian had failed to ensure Xue Yang’s demise.

One of the three missing pieces of Yin Iron rose from his hand to hover over his head, crowning him in darkness.

“Who might you be who dares to go against me?” Xue Chonghai pushed himself to his feet, and the resentment spilled over him like a shroud of smoke. “Not who I expected, but he’s everywhere around you. You smell like the essence of the clever little master who thought he could vanquish me if that essence were buried in snow. And yet, how did he manage to keep you so... pure?”

Lan Wangji would not have considered himself *pure* after months of sleeping with Wei Wuxian. Of course, Xue Chonghai meant uncontaminated by Wei Wuxian’s cultivation. Lan Wangji concluded that Xue Chonghai had not understood, perhaps was incapable of understanding, that Wei Wuxian had used some of the same building blocks to found an entirely different form of cultivation.

He felt no need to clarify matters. Striking three chords in quick succession, Lan Wangji pressed inward, edging toward a column structure that might provide shelter from a single blow. But his waves of energy broke against Xue Chonghai’s shroud, and he sidestepped the final wave. It crashed into the golden barrier of the array.

The light flickered, though Lan Wangji’s spiritual energy should have simply been absorbed on contact. Xue Chonghai must have weakened the array already; it was only luck that it still held.

“Poor mortal lover. You don’t know how outmatched you are.” Xue Chonghai dusted off his shoulder, dismissive, but the movement betrayed a faltering stiffness. So he had not entirely overcome the weaknesses of a Jiangshi. “Tell me, when I kill you, will Wei Wuxian give into his fate and become like me?”

Lan Wangji could not risk accomplishing Xue Chonghai’s goals for him. Standard Lan techniques did not have the precision to hit Xue Chonghai without risking a disruption to the array. Fire would be a better solution, if only he’d thought to ask for a talisman.

The techniques Lan Wangji had used extensively during the Sunshot Campaign were far more malleable. It would be fitting to use Lan Yi’s own techniques in her defense.

Stocked up on stolen energy and Yin Iron-fueled resentment both, Xue Chonghai sliced though the blades of energy no ghost or undead being should have been capable of opposing. But it seemed he had to focus on each and every one.

The cloud of resentment expanded into a dark dense cloud that filled the cavern, but though Lan Wangji could not see a thing, did not dare to inhale, he continued to play. When the smoke cleared, only his guqin separated him from Xue Chonghai, his head cocked at an unnatural angle.

Not enough distance to keep Xue Chonghai’s hand from wrapping around his throat, to keep those eyes from burning into him with every stolen drop of qi. The qi was pulled from him like dragon’s beard candy was pulled to floss, a trickle at the start, the threads between them

multiplied as Xue Chonghai fed. His lungs constricted painfully, robbed of breath for too long, and black spots began to dance in front of his eyes.

But a Lan who had use of his hands was not yet defeated.

One of his blades of energy made its return, snapping around Xue Chonghai's waist. Grip loosening, Xue Chonghai cried out in soul-deep pain, giving Lan Wangji the chance to plant his boot against Xue Chonghai's belly, and shove.

Xue Chonghai flew back across the cave, only to catch himself in mid-air, chuckling madly. "You're spirited. I see why he likes you. But it won't be enough to save you."

He improvised, calling up a make-shift shield, a pale imitation of the one Mianmian learned from Baoshan Sanren's writings. Lan Wangji wheezed, trying to suck in air and keep his fingers in motion at the same time. *Hurry, Wei Ying*, he thought. Weakened, with his loss the enemy's gain, Lan Wangji could not last much longer. He counted the seconds, pouring in everything he had.

Xue Chonghai did not even bother to strike at him directly, letting his resentment eat away at the shield. Even that was too much for Lan Wangji.

His shield fell at a count of sixty-eight.

He could not even dodge the projectile Xue Chonghai hurled at him, and his knees did not give out fast enough.

How strange, after everything, to be killed by a dagger.

Would Wei Wuxian mourn Lan Wangji, or his tool?

How would Xiongzhong take the news? Would Shufu be able to bear it?

"Lan Zhan!" Wei Wuxian called from somewhere nearby, and Lan Wangji closed his eyes. He did not mind facing death head on, but he did not want his husband's reaction to be the last thing he saw. He thought instead of Wei Wuxian smiling and handing him a rabbit, before it all began.

But something shoved into his side, and Lan Wangji stumbled, startled into looking back.

Wei Wuxian coughed, and his chin was painted red. He clutched his side, and planted himself in front of Lan Wangji. The dagger meant for Lan Wangji was embedded there.

"Xue Chonghai, it's been a long time. Did you know your soul is still fraying?" "The more you feed, the more of yourself you lose. But wait too long between the lives you take, and you'll be stuck hopping around on stiff legs, no more intimidating than a common Jiangshi. Quite the quandary, isn't it?"

"You have not learned humility in the years since last we met," Xue Chonghai growled through bared teeth.

“Pot, meet kettle.” Wei Wuxian pulled the dagger from his side, biting his lip to hide his wince. Blood poured from the wound, but the flow slowed even as he waved the dagger at Xue Chonghai with a cold smile on his lips. “Nice blade. I think I’ll butcher you with it for daring to touch my husband.”

A bolt of possessiveness shot through Lan Wangji, followed quickly by worry. Wei Wuxian would heal quickly from what would kill an ordinary man, but it was still terrifying to see him hurt. Lan Wangji wanted to insist he did not need protection. He wanted to swoon at Wei Wuxian’s feet. He wanted to sweep Wei Wuxian up in his arms and fuss over him. He wanted to plunge the dagger back in and twist it.

He *wanted* to hate him.

“Husband? How sweet. I hope you enjoy watching each other die.” Xue Chonghai lifted his hands above his head, and resentment flocked to him, congealing into a dense, dark mass that it pained Lan Wangji to look upon. “Maybe I’ll stick around to watch, once my sword and the last piece of Yin Iron are back in my hands.”

Wei Wuxian’s head swiveled toward the array, and he paled with more than blood loss, though to Lan Wangji’s eyes it looked no worse than when he’d entered. “Fuck, it’s about to fail. Take this, and use it on my cue.”

Lan Wangji did not ask what cue. Could not, with Xue Chonghai so close.

But Wei Wuxian reached back blindly, offering the dagger to Lan Wangji. Trusting Lan Wangji would take it, though he had done his best to make Wei Wuxian think he hated him.

As he took it, carefully avoiding brushing his fingers against Wei Wuxian’s, he glanced down, and gasped at the sight of blood trickling from the hem of Wei Wuxian’s robes on to Lan Wangji’s boot, staining the pale leather scarlet.

The blood hadn’t stopped yet. Shouldn’t the blood have stopped?

Ignoring his wound, Wei Wuxian produced Chenqing from the air, and beckoned. As he began to play, Xue Chonghai flew toward them, enveloped so thoroughly in his cloud that not even light could enter.

But as he passed overhead, Wei Wuxian reached up and into the cloud. One handed, he played the same shrill note over and over again, and the cloud went still, down to its swirling wisps, for just a moment. Lan Wangji slashed blindly into the cloud, and was rewarded with a sharp hiss.

Xue Chonghai broke free, rushing onward toward the array, leaving only a dim gray thread in Wei Wuxian’s grasp.

Undeterred, Wei Wuxian took the dagger from Lan Wangji’s hand, now tipped in black over the red of his blood.



“Xue Chonghai!” Wei Wuxian shouted, as he drew a circle of light around the dagger from point to hilt and back again, and scrawled characters within, forming a makeshift array the way he might a talisman. Swearing under his breath, Wei Wuxian wiped a character out of existence, and replaced it. Inventing an array on the spot, where few cultivators bothered to memorize even a handful of talismans, preferring to rely on their swords and carry around a few pre-written talismans for sending messages.

He had seen Wei Wuxian’s creations before, been inside his memory of crafting a new form of cultivation. But he had never gotten to watch the process of invention first hand.

It was deeply unfair that he only got to watch now when he could no longer suck Wei Wuxian off about it.

As Xue Chonghai buffeted the barrier around his sword, lines like lightning bolts shot through the barrier, his attack compounding the damage he’d done before Lan Wangji arrived.

But Wei Wuxian completed the final character with a flourish, and the resentment parted from Xue Chonghai, streaming up toward the ceiling where it hovered like a drop of oil in water, amorphous and ever shifting. Xue Chonghai dropped to the ground, and he nothing but an undead boy, his lips blue and complexion gray, having already consumed too much of the qi he’d taken to appear alive. “You’re not welcome here, Xue Chonghai. With the blood of the body you inhabit, and a piece of your soul, I banish you from my lands.”

Xue Chonghai tried to stand, to throw himself against the barrier one final time, but an invisible force knocked him to the ground face-first.

“We’ll see how long that lasts.” Xue Chonghai spat and bared his bloody teeth. “An hour, perhaps, before you’re no longer here to oppose me?” But his confidence did not stop blood red flames from leaping along his skin. They did not burn, exactly. His skin did not redden or char, but Xue Chonghai shrieked all the same. He grabbed his piece of Yin Iron from the air, and screamed for it to take him away. The resentment seemed to shred him apart, to be reassembled in another location, so much less elegant than the way it enveloped Wei Ying, and let him simply step from one place to the next.

But for now, he was gone.

Not a moment too soon. The array flickered again. Reappeared thin and pale, but still valiantly trying to stabilize, and went out.

The Yin Iron crashed to the ground first. The sword sent up its own cloud of resentment, shaped like a mushroom, in protest over its imprisonment. But it wasn’t the Yin Iron that worried Lan Wangji now.

He leapt forward at the same time as Wei Wuxian. And between them, despite Lan Wangji’s weakness and Wei Wuxian’s wound, they managed to catch Lan Yi before she hit the ground. She was limp, showing no signs of stirring even when they lowered her head to the ground. But her breathing was steady and calm as a dreamless sleep. As though nothing of import had happened.

Lan Wangji met Wei Wuxian's gaze for only a moment before he had to look down. There was a vivid stain on his robes, where Wei Wuxian had pressed against him. Lan Wangji's mind refused to process it.

"I'll get Wen Qing," Wei Wuxian said, but as he made to stand, his eyes unfocused, and he swayed.

*Something's wrong*, Lan Wangji realized belatedly, just before Wei Ying's eyes rolled up in his head, and he collapsed.

"Wei Ying!" Lan Wangji lunged to break his fall, and Wei Ying slammed into his chest, knocking the wind out of him. He didn't care if there was no breath in his lungs. All that mattered was his husband. Lan Wangji forced himself upright, resting Wei Ying over his thighs.

"Lan Zhan...?" Wei Ying asked, bleary and barely clinging to consciousness.

Lan Wangji found the hole in his robes where the dagger had pierced him, and ripped it open wider, unveiling the wound. And froze. The wound hadn't stopped bleeding. Only slowed to a thick, sluggish output the color of ink.

"So it seems I've been poisoned." Wei Ying laughed, like this could ever be funny. "And it's spreading, fuck. Guess he's learned a few things from Wen Ruohan. Get away from me before it infects you. I'll be fine, just let me —"

A cough wracked Wei Ying's body and dark blood, threaded with ink spilled down his chin.

Lan Wangji hated him, and he loved him, and he couldn't bear to lose him. Not to anything, but especially not to this. Not when they'd already found the cure together. Lan Wangji would burn his own life force before he watched his husband die.

In his current state, it seemed likely he would have to.

He didn't care.

What did it matter if he was furious with Wei Ying? *Nothing* would matter if he died. Lan Wangji was supposed to have eternity to decide if he could forgive him, not less than an incense stick.

"Shut up." Lan Wangji bent forward over Wei Ying and closed his eyes, pressing their foreheads together, the metal of his ribbon between them. And though he had so little left to him, Wei Ying's core welcomed him in, bolstering Lan Wangji rather than spending the energy protecting himself.

Lan Wangji soon realized why as he felt his way along meridians as familiar as his own, yet tainted. It was as though Xue Chonghai had injected resentment through all the safeguards Wei Ying kept around his cultivation. Despite Wei Ying's fears, the poison did not want Lan Wangji, for he did not have paths and hollows within him for resentment to flow through.

Where it was not supposed to linger, but burrowed into him anyway, termites hollowing a hive out of him, clinging harder the more Wei Ying tried to push the resentment out.

Like the infection spread by the puppets, but specifically tailored to use Wei Ying's own capabilities against him.

But Xue Chonghai did not know what they could do together.

He pried a fragment infection loose, and gave chase, pouring himself into purifying it. But even destroying one sent a wave of fatigue over him. He pushed on, destroying a second fragment, a third. Onward, through a never-ending maze, the infection increasing in density with every piece he destroyed.

Panic thrummed through Wei Ying, and he tried to push Lan Wangji out, but they fit together so closely Wei Ying could find no purchase to extract him. He only linked them closer together, until Wei Ying's feelings bled into his. Warmed him with their intensity, as they faded together.

If that bright, cherished feeling, wild as a rosebush that had overgrown its boundaries yet all the more carefully tended because of it, wasn't love, Lan Wangji didn't know what was. He basked in the feeling, weightless. Certain he was loved, completely and unconditionally, for the first time since he was six years old.

More than loved: wanted. With a desperation that overwhelmed him. Lan Wangji had never known anyone else could feel as intensely as he did, that it was possible to feel that way about him. No words could ever be sufficient to express that feeling, but it was in Wei Ying's eyes, every time he looked at Lan Wangji.

It would not be so bad, if it all ended here.

Here, with Wei Ying, where there could be no misunderstandings between them.

Lan Wangji began to let go.

And yet —

Qi flooded into him. Not his, not Wei Ying's, but that of an immortal. Dimly, Lan Wangji felt a hand wrapped around his wrist, returning what had been stolen. And though Wei Ying cried out silently, trying to reject his grandmother's gift, Lan Wangji did not hesitate to grab hold, chasing the clumps of resentment as they scurried away from him like insects. Cornered them, and burned them until not even ash remained.

Lan Wangji blinked flashes of light out of his eyes as he sat up, cradling Wei Ying against his chest, willing his vision to clear so he could see what he already felt was true. That Wei Ying would live.

That Lan Wangji would have time to find out if it was possible to reconcile anger and hurt with love.

Wei Ying gasped awake, flinging himself out of Lan Wangji's arms more quickly than he could secure his grip. A pang struck Lan Wangji's heart, before he saw Wei Ying bent over Lan Yi, sprawled on the ground next to them, frantically checking her for breath, a pulse. The remnants of the array gave off a dim, fading glow, casting grandmother and grandson in start shadow.

Lan Wangji watched, his limbs weighing him down. He was too relieved, overwhelmed, conflicted to try to move.

After an eternity in a dozen heartbeats, Wei Ying let out a relieved sigh, slumping over her. "Why did you do that, A-Ma?" He whispered, voice breaking.

"Silly boy. You think I'd let you die?" Lan Yi opened her eyes, her hand shaking as she tried to reach up to cup his cheek. Half-way there, her hand fell, but Wei Ying caught it on the way down.

"Do you think I've done all this just to watch *you* die?" Wei Ying demanded. "What will Waipo say when she finds out?"

*Someone should go get Baoshan Sanren*, Lan Wangji thought. His legs refused to budge.

"I'm not so weak I can't donate a bit of energy," Lan Yi insisted, though her voice wavered, and her eyelids drooped. "That boy of yours did the work."

"You're still here," He whispered in awe, though there wasn't a speck of hope in his eyes. Only heartbreak and confusion. "Lan Zhan — Lan Wangji. Thank you. I didn't expect — You didn't have too —"

Unable to bear his gaze a moment longer, Lan Wangji looked away, and Wei Ying fell silent. Out of the corner of his eye, Lan Wangji saw him staring at the ground. Wei Ying did not speak again. It felt like he was waiting for Lan Wangji to walk out of his life forever.

Lan Wangji did not understand. Wei Ying's feelings had been so bright and clear when Lan Wangji pushed past what should have been the point of no return in his attempt to root out the poison. Lan Wangji's own always filled him to overflowing. How could he not know?

Unless Wei Ying had not felt what he had? Lan Wangji's feelings were still safely, solely his own. Some of the tension went out of his shoulders.

And yet, that meant Wei Ying did *not* know how he felt. Did not know Lan Wangji had ever loved him, that he still did. Did not know he needed time, did not know if he could forgive.

His stomach lurched. How was he meant to explain, when he could not so much as look at Wei Ying outside of a life-or-death situation?

From her resting place on Wei Ying's lap, Lan Yi looked back and forth between them, her expression becoming all too knowing despite her exhaustion and long absence.

In lieu of words he did not possess, Lan Wangji finally pushed himself to his feet, hoping his knees would not give out. They held, barely.

“I will inform Baoshan Sanren,” he informed them, and did not look back over his shoulder.

Wei Ying should not try to walk a long distance just yet, though he would recover quickly with the poison removed from his system. Wen Ning would be busy with the mess in the banquet hall, though Lan Wangji did not doubt he would check on Wei Ying if he did not appear soon. They would be fine.

And though Lan Wangji was nowhere near his usual strength, once he started it got easier. He felt strangely energized, no longer inclined to crumple if someone tapped him on the shoulder. Lan Yi had poured more into him than just what he needed to save Wei Ying.

It was not until he reached the tree with deep roots that he remembered to worry that the mountain would no longer welcome him.

How could it when he had rejected its favorite son?

And yet, no sooner had he pressed Wen Ning’s token to the tree, than the portal opened, as if it was urging him to step through.

The mountain still thought there was reason for him to return.

For A-Yuan and A-Xi, he thought at first. But he hadn’t been thinking of them, only that he needed to help Wei Ying.

Wei Wuxian.

As if sensing the urgency, the portal set him down in front of Baoshan Sanren’s cottage rather than the mountain peak. Lan Wangji braced himself, stepped forward, knocked — and the door swung open.

Baoshan Sanren dropped a basket full of apples at the sight of him, and left them rolling across the floor.

“The banishment won’t last longer than mid-winter,” Wei Ying said.

They were in a guest room, with Lan Yi resting on the bed. Baoshan Sanren sat on its edge, holding her hand. Wen Qing had bustled in, the cut on her forehead already scabbed over, and ordered Lan Wangji and Wei Ying to sit on the floor if they insisted on being awake. After a quick check over, Wen Qing returned to the clean up in the banquet hall but not before Baoshan Sanren caught her by the wrist to donate the qi she needed to heal herself, with a reminder that Wen Qing would be no use to others if she did not take care of herself.

“I needed all of the blood we gathered from Xue Chonghai to stop him, and it’s possible I was actively dying.” Wei Ying continued with a shrug, earning a glare from everyone present. Save Lan Wangji, who studied the swirls of wood in the bedframe intently. “Lan Zh— Lan Wangji saved me.”

“We’ll have to figure out a trap under controlled circumstances,” Baoshan Sanren mused. “But not tonight. We all need rest.”

“Not quite yet,” Lan Yi said. “A-Xian. What happened between you and Lan Wangji? *Something* isn’t right here.”

“It’s um. It’s possible Lan Wangji overheard me talking about the way to destroy the Yin Iron? Because I didn’t tell him?” Wei Ying made an aborted effort at a nervous laugh, and picked at a loose thread in his hem.

Lan Yi groaned and swore to the heavens. “This is what you do without me? Lie to the best thing that ever happened to you for months? I didn’t raise you to do that. And you let him?” She glared at her wife, retrieving her hand. “Niangzi, don’t think we aren’t going to talk about this. But out, both of you. Let me talk to the poor boy.”

“Yes, Niangzi,” Baoshan Sanren bent over to kiss her softly on the forehead, and rose. “Come along, A-Xian. You certainly need *your* rest after the day you’ve had.”

She grabbed him by the elbow, and Wei Ying went willingly, with only a brief glance back at the door.

Lan Yi patted the vacated spot on the bed, indicating Lan Wangji should sit at her side. His knees threatened to lock as he stood, but he managed.

“A-Xian has been very stupid,” She said. “But so have you, a little. Am I wrong?”

Lan Wangji blinked down at her, with her hair, almost completely white with a scant few threads of black, spread across the sheets. She wasn’t wrong about him. For months, he had neglected to ask about the very reason Wei Ying had needed an arranged marriage in the first place, losing himself in a fantasy of his own creation. He had known Wei Ying was hiding something, and ignored it until that was no longer an option.

Wei Ying should have told him. Lan Wangji should have asked.

“I ignored the warning signs,” he said.

“A very human thing to do.” Lan Yi patted his hand and gave him a weak, sympathetic smile. “And you found out in a very shocking way, didn’t you? How did my A-Xian dig himself into this hole?”

“I overheard him admitting to using me.” He could not lie to his ancestor the way he had been refusing to remember the whole of that conversation to himself. Lan Wangji wanted to be angry, and it was easier to stay angry if he did not remember the sound of his husband’s voice choked with sobs. “He said he needed to tell me, while crying on your wife.”

“Ah,” was all Lan Yi said for a long moment. Before, finally, she continued, pausing between each phrase to catch her breath. “A-Xian has always been terrible at sharing his burdens. I don’t say that as an excuse. It’s made him *immensely* frustrating to raise despite centuries of childcare experience. Wen Qing has been the only exception because their friendship began

as an alliance. And that's not a good thing, because she's the same. They convinced themselves not knowing would keep you safe, and that you would hate them for the truth. I know, because I know my grandson."

"He didn't trust me," Lan Wangji whispered.

"Not at first," she agreed. "You're a sweet boy, he liked you immediately. But this secret — would you have shared it with someone you just met? *Epecially* someone raised as you were? It requires more of you than most cultivators would be willing to give. Once you've channeled resentment, your cultivation will never be the same. You'll have to learn A-Xian's techniques for your own health, even if you don't intend to use it."

He had realized the latter in Empathy with Wei Ying, as he experienced first hand how Wei Ying hollowed himself out to make it possible to use resentment without slowly corrupting and killing himself. And again not even hours later, in purging him of poison.

It was very late, it had been a very, very long day, and Lan Wangji was very, very tired. Perhaps it was the next morning already. And in the dawn of a new day, he might understand why Wei Ying had been hesitant to ask Lan Wangji to make a choice from which there was no return.

Lan Wangji had no intention of telling his brother or uncle, and he had known them all his life. They would not understand.

But Lan Wangji was not his brother or his uncle, and he *did* need to know.

Lan Yi must have seen his thoughts on his face, for she said, "You're conflicted. So let me ask: when should A-Xian have known he could trust you and you would not have taken the truth poorly?"

"Our wedding night."

"You wedding night," Lan Yi repeated. "*Really?* You would have preferred learning this right *after* you made your bows?"

Lan Wangji had been so full of desire that day, so eager to claim his first kiss and his first time with his new husband. He would not have been happy with the delay, if Wei Ying told him then. But he had also been a very single-minded newlywed. He might have pushed the revelation aside in favor of convincing Wei Ying to ravish him.

What other option was there?

It would have been too much during the Sunshot Campaign. But on the mountain, before Wei Wuxian had seen him choose him in front of others, seen the extent of his capabilities with demonic cultivation in action and accepted them, how could he have been certain Lan Wangji was worthy of his trust? Would it have been better to learn in the first weeks after their marriage, when he would have felt utterly used? Any later, and Lan Wangji would have reacted as he had that day.

If, perhaps, less intensely, for with each day that passed Wei Ying grew more thoroughly rooted in his heart.

“It would hurt less if you didn’t love him so much, is that what you’re thinking?” Lan Yi asked.

He nodded.

“My wife said that to me once. Right before she gave me a second chance.” Lan Yi smiled at the memory, and Lan Wangji’s breath caught. “Because she wanted to, mind you, not because I deserved one. Nothing says you have to give A-Xian another chance. No one would blame you if you didn’t.”

“I miss him.” It had been less than a day, and Lan Wangji missed him.

“Even so.”

The thought of spending the rest of his life without ever hearing Wei Ying call *Lan Zhan* with a grin brighter than sunshine on a cloudless day, without listening to Wei Ying ramble about talismans, without Wei Ying’s warmth pressed against his side, without improvising a duet with him for nothing more than the thrill of it, was unbearable.

“If you truly wish to make him suffer, I can’t say A-Xian doesn’t deserve it. I only wish that I could have seen your wedding. If I am to depart this world, I would have liked to see him happy.” Lan Yi twisted her hands in the sheets, and for a moment, she looked all of her years. Ancient, and dwarfed by her bed, soon to leave behind everyone she loved unless Lan Wangji managed a miracle.

Could he not at least grant the ancestor he owed so much one wish?

Lan Wangji did not feel ready to face Wei Ying alone. But after coming so close to losing him, feeling the love Wei Ying had for him with such an undeniable strength, he knew he would be ready long before he should be. If he were a reasonable person, like Mianmian, and not a Lan in love.

“Perhaps there is a way,” he said, and watched as a crooked grin spread across Lan Yi’s face.

*Any feelings you have for me ... they aren’t real.*

Wei Wuxian stared forlorn at the last wisp of steam drifting off the cup of tea he’d poured for his absent husband. It had become a sort of ritual to brew a pot of tea as if for Lan Zhan every evening, though there was no one there to drink it. His right hand reached up his sleeve, stroking the tassel of Lan Zhan’s talisman. Unwanted, now. It’s return a confirmation that he could never be forgiven.

It had been a month since Lan Zhan learned the truth.

A month since Lan Zhan last spoke to him.



A month since Xue Chonghai tried to steal the rest of the Yin Iron and woke A-Ma in the process.

Xue Fucking Chonghai.

Wei Wuxian had set him free after all. Set him free to hurt Lan Zhan, and countless others across the Cultivation World, and conveniently vacated a body for him to take over as a jiangshi. As powerful as he had been alive, but with his last scraps of morality drained away by the centuries.

When he heard the surname Xue at Koi Tower, Wei Wuxian had realized that he had not destroyed Xue Chonghai entirely. However, he had thought Xue Chonghai was whispering to Jin Guangshan and his cronies from within the Yin Iron as he had to Xue Yang. Wei Wuxian had not expected Xue Chonghai to be the thief himself, only a puppetmaster.

But how could Wei Wuxian focus on defeating him, when Lan Zhan did not believe he loved him?

Lan Zhan hadn't fled far, only a half hour's leisurely walk to the inn in Yiling, but he had fled. And in the face of his consequences, Wei Wuxian had realized how avoidable they had been.

If he'd revealed his secrets even a little earlier, perhaps they could have at least been friends.

But Wei Wuxian did not have the luxury of staring at teapots all day. Even now, there was a letter in front of him from Nie Mingjue, though he was having difficulty making the blur on the page resolve into characters. Even crafting while he read didn't help. All his fingers wanted to make were apology gifts for a man who did not want them.

The day after Xue Chonghai's attack, the Yin Iron had been moved into the workshop Wen Ning had built for him, sealing it in boxes behind new wards. But A-Ma could not be put back in stasis, and each time Xue Chonghai or Jin Guangshan used their pieces, she faded a bit more.

A-Ma's deterioration had reached a point where it progressed more quickly when far from the Yin Iron, and so she had remained in the Burial Mounds rather than retreat to the mountain with her wife. Lan Zhan — Lan Wangji — only seemed to come up the path from Yiling to speak to A-Ma. Wei Wuxian couldn't begrudge Lan Zhan the chance to get to know his childhood hero.

But when Lan Zhan was visiting A-Ma, Wei Wuxian couldn't.

Lan Zhan looked well from a distance at least. Physically healed.

Since Wei Wuxian banished him from Yiling, Xue Chonghai had grown more careful where he left his victims, concealing them where they would not be found for a week or more. Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao were keeping track, but even the men who ran the Cultivation World's most effective intelligence network could not pinpoint where Xue Chonghai would strike next, save that it would be no more than a day's ride from Yiling by horse.

They *had*; however, found Jin disciples skulking around near Yiling's borders more than once. Jin Guangshan was plotting something, and Wei Wuxian suspected he had only as long as his banishment of Xue Chonghai lasted to prepare. Another month, until the start of winter, at most.

At least Wei Wuxian had unraveled Xue Chonghai's claws from Song Lan's body. Though he could not be completely certain it would hold against the Yin Iron. Song Lan would have to be gone before the banishment expired. But Wen Qing had only performed the surgery to transfer Xiao Xingchen's left eye to Song Lan two days ago, and Xiao Xingchen needed a few more days to recover.

Even the disciples and their instructors left him to his own, miserable devices. He was encouraged to remain in his rooms — now his alone — as much as possible. His meals were delivered without prompting when before someone would have dragged him out for dinner at least.

Wei Wuxian rubbed his eyes, and tried to focus on the letter again.

No luck.

But a knock on the door saved him from further futile efforts. "What is it?"

Wen Ning poked his head in. "There's a cultivator flying toward the Burial Mounds at top speed. We think they might be about to crash?"

Well, at least that should be interesting enough to take his mind off Lan Zhan for...

Who was he kidding? Nothing could take his mind off Lan Zhan.

But Wei Wuxian grabbed Suibian, and took off out the door. From above, the unfortunate cultivator was readily visible, and descending rapidly toward the forest. Wei Wuxian sped toward him, too fast to see the cultivator's face before he caught them by the elbow just as their sword hit a tree top. The sword fell from branch to branch to the ground, but the cultivator hung from his hand.

Jin colors. Red dot in the center of the forehead. Scowling. But also not yelling, squirming, and cursing him out.

"Jin Zixuan?" He asked. Pulling his unexpected guest up on to Suibian. "What the hell are you doing here?"

"Put me down first." Jin Zixuan demanded.

"I could have just let you fall," Wei Wuxian reminded him.

"... Please," Jin Zixuan added grudgingly.

"Now that's how you get set down on solid ground and not pushed off swords. Jiang-guniang must be teaching you manners." Wei Wuxian had to tease the man, but he did guide Suibian

down through the branches to where Jin Zixuan's sword had fallen. When it was only a short distance down, Wei Wuxian jumped to the ground.

Jin Zixuan tried to do the same, but his knees gave out, and he tumbled over sideways into the dirt.

Wei Wuxian picked up a stick and poked him with it. "Are you injured?"

"Rude." Jin Zixuan sat up, with a smudge of dirt on his face, his clothes covered in the leafy debris of late autumn and made a displeased face up at him. "Where's Lan Wangji? At least he understands politeness, if not propriety."

"Not here," Wei Wuxian said shortly.

"Ugh. Well, I guess I'll tell you then." Jin Zixuan grabbed his own sword from the nearby underbrush, and used it to push himself to his feet. "Fuqin is sending out messages claiming he has a witness who saw you have the Yin Iron. Of course, you do have some of it, but — he's planning to invite you to Lanling again, and somehow expose you."

"That's not entirely unexpected." Especially now that Xue Chonghai could confirm for him that Wei Wuxian did have the missing pieces. A jiangshi could hardly act as witness, but it would be easy enough to pay someone off to pretend to be a former servant of Yiling Wei. "But did you just fly straight here?"

Jin Zixuan nodded. "Fuqin thinks I went to visit Yanli again."

Which meant his entirely unsubtle flight from the direction of Lanling would have been witnessed by Jin Guangshan's spies. "Well, you'll have to now and stay there until further notice. Our borders are watched."

Jin Zixuan shrugged, apparently having no problem with that. "You'll have to act soon."

"I know." Wei Wuxian patted him hard on the shoulder, making him stumble. Considering Jin Zixuan had come all this way to warn them, and exhausted himself in the process, Wei Wuxian figured he should stop messing with him. It was just that this was the first time in weeks someone hadn't looked at him with pity. "Let's get you some food first."

But when they reached the kitchens, the cooks outright refused to allow Wei Wuxian inside. Everyone was conspiring against him lately.

"No one's allowed in now, Zongzhu. Your grandmother's orders." One of the cooks, a woman with steam-reddened cheeks, pointed her head out to inform him.

Pointing at Jin Zixuan, Wei Wuxian said, "He's going to faint if he doesn't eat something soon. Is there anything you can spare?"

The cook looked Jin Zixuan up and down, and sniffed. "Since your guest is obviously dead on his feet, he can come in and taste test. Zongzhu must wait for the wed— for dinner like everyone else."

Jin Zixuan was yanked inside, and the door shut in Wei Wuxian's face. He blinked at it, bemused. Something smelled good, like they were cooking for another feast. But while people around here didn't have the best history of telling Wei Wuxian about celebrations, there wasn't any reason for one. Perhaps Waipo had asked for a special dish to be prepared for A-Ma.

"A-Xian, there you are." As if he had summoned them by thinking it, his grandmothers appeared behind him while he was still staring at the unbudging door.

Both of them, one at either elbow, even though A-Ma wasn't supposed to wander so far from her bed. She looked stronger than most days since she'd woken, alert and only using a stick to keep herself upright. But if she had energy today, she shouldn't spend it. "A-Ma, what are you doing up?"

"We have a surprise for you," Waipo said. "Come with us."

He glanced back at the door, which failed to spit out a savior in the form of a spoiled sect heir. "Waipo, A-Ma, Jin Zixuan just brought critical information, I need to —"

"Ah-ah, you may figure out what to do about this new information tomorrow." Waipo struck out with a strip of dark cloth, and before Wei Wuxian could react, he was blindfolded. He tried to grab it off, but it was like she had pasted it onto his skin. She planted her hands on his shoulders, spun him around, and shoved him so he stumbled in the direction she wanted him to go.

No matter how plaintively he whined, "Waipooooooooo," she did not relent until he heard the sound of a door closing, and the rustling of the wind was muffled.

A bundle of cloth was shoved into his arms.

"Put this on," Waipo ordered.

"Blindfolded?" Wei Wuxian asked. "Are you plotting to make a fool out of me?"

"You did that fine on your own," she pointed out, which — yeah, he had.

"Perhaps you should help him," A-Ma said. She might be the gentle one, but this, whatever it was, was almost certainly her idea. "We do want him to look nice."

"I can dress myself!" Wei Wuxian protested. "Just let me see!"

Of course, his protests were only an invitation for Waipo to tease him more, and so Wei Wuxian found himself tugged this way and that until his simple, functional outer robe was replaced with a heavy, fine silk.

The door opened and closed as Waipo was fastening a belt weighed down with ornaments around his waist.

"Good, you're here." A-Ma said to whoever had arrived. "Can you finish up with A-Xian while we oversee the final preparations? Make sure he arrives on time."

“I wouldn’t let him miss this for the world,” Wen Qing replied. Even she was in on this?

“Wen Qing?” He asked, once the slamming of the door signaled his grandmothers’ departure. “What is this?”

“Your husband’s revenge.” Wen Qing sounded far too pleased about that for someone who had encouraged him not to tell Lan Zhan the truth. She didn’t have to rub salt into his wound, when she had managed to work things out with Mianmian and he couldn’t with Lan Zhan.

“Great, thanks. Very informative.” There was a yanking on his guan as she unfastened it, and let down his hair.

“You really think I’d tell you even if I hadn’t been specifically warned not to by your terrifying immortal grandmother?” She began pulling a comb through his hair without a care for how it might hurt.

So no, she wouldn’t. “I think you’d give me the worst hints you could come up with.”

“I just did.” She said, and defeated a knot by force.

He yelped and tried to bat the comb away. “Stop yanking on my hair. Only my husband is supposed to comb it for me, you terror.”

And Lan Zhan never would again.

Wen Qing smacked his hands with the flat of her comb. “Not on this occasion. It’s a tangled mess because you’ve been stewing in your own misery for the last month. What would your husband say about that?”

“Wen Qing, he left me weeks ago. He should be happy I’m suffering.” Key word: should. But Lan Zhan wasn’t nearly vindictive enough on his own behalf to wish eternal misery on him. So what could Wen Qing possibly mean by Lan Zhan’s revenge?

“I guess we’ll find out.” She hummed, and yanked on the comb again.

This time, when Wei Wuxian was led forward blindfolded, it was by the hand, letting him keep whatever scraps of dignity he had left. So he shut up and let Wen Qing guide him.

He had no idea where Wen Qing was taking him, and he hated it. How did Lan Zhan trust that Wei Wuxian wouldn’t take advantage of his temporary sensory deprivation and leave him there? Or push him in a lake? The trust Lan Zhan put in him had been a heady feeling, made Wei Wuxian want more than anything to live up to it.

Wei Wuxian would never have that trust again. He had never deserved it in the first place.

And of course, Wen Qing might actually push him in a lake for mouthing curses at her, surprise or no. “We’re not walking toward the river, are we?”

“Don’t tempt me,” she grumbled.

Someone giggled nearby, and they were shushed by several others. So: he had an audience. Who all had been invited to witness what Wen Qing called revenge, and his grandmothers called a surprise? Whatever it was, Mianmian would be sorry she missed it.

Wen Qing came to a stop, and let go of his hand after a few more steps. “You can remove your blindfold now,” she whispered. And left him there.

Half expecting the cloth to stay stuck, Wei Wuxian reached up and pulled the blindfold free. It fell from his suddenly loose grasp, fluttering on the breeze.

All he could see was Lan Zhan. Facing him, and swathed in red and gold from head to toe. Curling smoke and chrysanthemums wound their way up his sleeves, and from his hem to his knees. Above them, a pattern of tiny birds in flight, arching toward the chest, where a dragon coiled, surrounded by clouds. A simple red ribbon, void of ornamentation, wrapped around his waist. And here Wei Wuxian was certain he was imagining things, because it looked like one of his. Atop his head was a guan forged from gold in the shape of a spider lily, like their thrones, and inlaid with garnet.

No one ever had, or ever would wear wedding robes so well as Lan Zhan.

And Lan Zhan’s face, so open, so pleased to see him at the altar— Wei Wuxian felt like he had been thrown back in time. But Lan Zhan’s attire was different, more elaborate, and not the rushed, borrowed things he’d worn that day. Time had not unspooled to give him a second chance, much as he wished it.

“Lan Zhan? Is this real?” Wei Wuxian couldn’t see how it could be.

“I love you, Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan said with a small, yet confident smile. “Will you marry me a second time?”

That settled it. “A dream, then.”

Lan Zhan reached out and pinched his cheek, not painfully, but enough to make him yelp. “Your answer?”

“I — I —” Wei Wuxian stuttered, his mind struggling to catch up. But there could be only one answer. “Yes, of course, anytime, anywhere, as many times as you want. But Lan Zhan, what? Don’t you hate me?”

“Sometimes,” was the first thing this Lan Zhan shaped like his most deeply buried fantasies said that rang true. “That does not seem to stop me from falling deeper in love with you every day.”

“Oh.” Wei Wuxian felt faint.

Lan Zhan said he loved him twice and insisted it wasn’t a dream? Impossible.

*Any feelings you have for me ... they aren’t real.*

Lan Zhan had pushed the freefall of Wei Wuxian's heart into love with him onto some idealized Lan Zhan that belonged on a pedestal. As if it wasn't possible to want to worship every inch of him and respect him as an equal, to see how he excelled, and still see his flaws.

*I gave you everything and you broke my heart.*

Wei Wuxian hadn't let himself think of that sentence, when he relived Lan Zhan leaving over and over again in his head. Because it implied Lan Zhan's heart was his to break, and believing that would break him.

*You were always ready to let me go.*

That was true. Wei Wuxian had no excuse.

But if Lan Zhan was giving him another chance to choose him, he would cling to it as hard as Lan Zhan let him.

"If you're ready to hear it this time," Wei Wuxian paused, giving Lan Zhan a chance to tell him no. "I love you."

Glowing golden under the moonlight, Lan Zhan smiled.

He smiled back. Helplessly, stupidly in love. Content to stand there staring into Lan Zhan's eyes for as long as he wished.

From behind him came the familiar sound of Waipo clearing her throat.

Wei Wuxian turned, and there she was. A-Ma smiled and waved from a cushioned chair at her side, both of them dressed in their finest. Waipo in a deep, warm purple patterned with peach flowers, A-Ma in pink with plum blossoms. With Lan Zhan filling his senses, Wei Wuxian had not noticed until then that nearly his entire family was there. He'd entirely forgotten they had an audience at all.

A few people were missing. Min-qianbei, as well as Yan'er and her agetates had likely remained behind in case any of the villagers of the valley called on the mountain for aid. Wen-popo must have remained behind to watch the children. Their absence made this wedding feel slightly more plausible, for if it was merely his imagination, or the effects of a curse trapping him in a dream filled with his dearest desires, everyone he loved would have been there.

Though A-Yuan and A-Xi were absent, his ghostly Shibo had tagged along for the ride. Wei Wuxian gave him a little boost of carefully measured resentment to help him become visible.

Lan Zhan sucked in a breath, staring at Wei Wuxian's face, and he realized his eyes had gone red. "Oh, sorry, I can —" he stared, but Lan Zhan shook his head, not quite meeting his gaze as he bit his lip.

"A-Xian poured tea for Lan Qiren before, and so now it is our turn," Waipo announced, unable to give him a break.

Lan Zhan kept his eyes averted as he knelt to begin serving tea, Wei Wuxian following a beat later. But it felt different than the way Lan Zhan avoided his gaze before, a tension born of anticipation rather than apprehension.

Wait, when Lan Zhan reacted strangely to his eyes, had he not thought they were strange, but rather, attractive? It was fortunate Wei Wuxian was already kneeling because his head spun. This was too many revelations for one day.

Wei Wuxian helped to direct Lan Wangji in the correct order of serving tea, as the appearance of his martial aunts and uncles did not always match their age. And Baoshan Sanren, eldest of them all, appeared younger than all but Xiao Xingchen and one of his shigus. Unlike his previous experience with tea ceremonies, each of them drank to the marriage without hesitation. But not without asking questions.

Waipo and A-Ma were, ironically, the easy ones.

“You’ll get it right on the second try, A-Xian. We did, and we raised you.” Waipo said, and drained her cup.

A-Ma reached out, and pinched Lan Zhan’s cheek. “A-Zhan, we’re so happy to formally welcome you to the family.”

As they moved down the line to his eldest shigu, Lan Zhan was shyly, secretly pleased.

Though they were his family, and had played a part in raising him since he was all of eight years old, each and every one of his relatives implored Wei Wuxian not to let this unparalleled husband slip through his fingers again. Confused and still more than half-convinced this was a dream, Wei Wuxian agreed.

“If I am so fortunate to earn a glance from him, I will cherish it,” he promised his eldest shigu, and the questions continued.

“How will you keep him fed, sheltered, and clothed?” was a soft one from Ghostly Shibo.

“Will you night hunt together for the rest of your days?” was Xiao Xingchen’s question.

“Forget night hunting, do you know his interests for a quiet night in?” His third eldest shibo chimed in, though he’d already had his turn.

Tea, books, and music were the obvious answers, but he added in head and shoulder massage for good measure. Lan Zhan got tense easily.

“Will you communicate your desires in bed and ensure both of you are satisfied?” His shigu who was Xiao Xingchen’s agemate asked.

That, at least was easy to answer. Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi did not raise their disciples to be shy about sex. Though for Lan Zhan’s sake, he would never share details. “Ah, Shigu, we didn’t have trouble with that part before.”

“Double your efforts then,” she advised him.



“Yes, Shigu.”

When their questions were through and it was time for their bows, there was a bowl for washing their hands. Over it, Wei Wuxian tried again to ask what Lan Zhan was thinking.

“Lan Wangji —”

“Lan Zhan. Please.” Lan Zhan interrupted, pleading.

Wei Wuxian did not think he’d meant to say that, but he tried, cautiously —

“Lan Zhan.”

“Wei Ying.” Lan Zhan sounded like a great weight had been taken off his shoulders with only the sound of his name.

He had only used Lan Zhan’s courtesy name a handful of times since he asked him to, but he wondered if it had been as hard for Lan Zhan to hear it as it had been on him, when Lan Zhan reverted to using his.

“Lan Zhan, are you certain you wouldn’t rather talk before we do this?” A second wedding between them could be no more binding than the first, but now it would be a marriage they chose for personal reasons rather than political. Should they not work out every doubt between them before they made their vows?

But then, Lan Zhan could have spoken to him at any time before this wedding. So perhaps it was a ridiculous question, but it was one Wei Wuxian needed to ask.

“Are you certain you love me?” was Lan Zhan’s only reply.

“Yes,” fell from his lips before Wei Wuxian could consider his answer. “Falling in love with you is the only thing I’ve done *right* since I met you.”

“Then yes,” Lan Zhan said, simply. “Anything else, ask me after.”

Wei Wuxian made his bows with tears streaming down his cheeks.

The wedding feast was smaller than their first one, but to his surprise, many of the townspeople had come. They wrapped around the courtyard where the disciples trained during the day, enjoying the feast the cooks had prepared, and offering their congratulations in ones and twos.

A-Ma brought out her guqin, and insisted on playing the first song. One of her favorites, a folk song Lan Zhan also loved. A group of young girls from town, along with An Yulun and a few more disciples got up to dance to it. Less an impromptu performance, and more a whirlwind of skirts and giggling.

Their first wedding had been short of any entertainment, but the joy of these dancers was more infectious than any professional troop.

“We played this song once, and Baoshan Sanren — Waipo — left,” Lan Zhan said.

And Wei Wuxian hadn’t explained then because Lan Zhan didn’t yet know about A-Ma. He could be honest now. “It’s different when A-Ma plays it. She wrote it, you know, before they retreated to the mountains. One of the few things she wrote for the joy of it, when she was young, instead of some greater purpose.”

“I believe I know what that feels like,” Lan Zhan said, and Wei Wuxian, still afraid he would dispel this fantasy, did not dare to ask what he meant.

Wei Wuxian didn’t entirely know what to do with himself throughout the feast. If Lan Zhan would want him to speak, or contemplate his beauty in silence, or anything. But he could at least get started on how his relatives asked him to treat Lan Zhan, by piling his favorite dishes onto his plate.

“We wouldn’t miss our Laozu’s wedding,” the teahouse owner said when he expressed his surprise, after she offered her congratulations. “Especially not after we spent all month helping your husband prepare it.”

“All month? Lan Zhan you really spent the month preparing all this while I — right.” He cleared his throat. “Is that what you were talking to A-Ma about?”

Lan Zhan’s ears were the same shade as his wedding robes. Even his cheeks had gone pink. He picked a piece of spicy beef up from Wei Wuxian’s bowl, and pushed it against Wei Wuxian’s lips, smearing the sauce.

Tentatively, he opened his mouth, and Lan Zhan pushed it in for him. But all it bought him was a delay. Once Wei Wuxian had chewed and swallowed, and licked his lips clean, he asked his question. “Did you — did you do all this for A-Ma?”

“She expressed a regret that she had not seen you married, but the second ceremony was my idea.” Lan Zhan put his chopsticks down, and clasped his hands in his lap. “I would not be here if I did not want to be.”

“Oh.” Wei Wuxian decided he couldn’t ask any more now, or he would ruin Lan Zhan’s hard work by spending the rest of the feast sobbing. “It’s perfect, Lan Zhan. I would marry you in a roadside temple with no regrets, but you deserved a wedding like this all along. And my grandmothers getting to see it, I — you’re wonderful. I haven’t told you enough.”

He blinked, and Lan Zhan was standing before him, a hand reaching out, asking him to take it. His answer was never in question.

Their guests cheered and shouted as they made their exit.

Lan Zhan drew him into the meditation niche Wei Wuxian had had built for him. It was not designed to fit two grown men, and so they had to lean into each other, their legs entangled, their breath mixing. Lan Zhan melted into his side, and Wei Wuxian realized the enforced closeness was precisely why he'd folded them into the space, so Wei Wuxian would understand that he had not only somehow regained the privilege of touching him, but that Lan Zhan needed him to.

"Lan Zhan, Lan Wangji, Hanguang-jun, my husband most beloved," Wei Wuxian whispered into Lan Zhan's hair. "I can't believe this is real. I thought you would never speak to me again, and I would have deserved it. So please, what is this?"

"Our wedding night." Lan Zhan... joked? Wei Wuxian lifted his head to squint at him, and was still trying to figure out if he'd interpreted that correctly when Lan Zhan continued. "I forgave you sometime around when this dragon was completed." He tapped on elaborate gold embroidery over Wei Wuxian's heart, that matched his own. Wei Wuxian hadn't even noticed it "Lan Yi helped me understand that anger and love can go hand in hand, so long as you learn from your mistakes."

Wei Wuxian looked down, not quite understanding why that thought sent unpleasant chills up his spine, and down his arms until he said, "And if I'm not capable of that?"

Lan Zhan frowned. "What do you mean?"

"You saw how like me Xue Chonghai was. Under other circumstances, I could have easily been like him." Wei Wuxian hadn't wanted to show his time in the Burial Mounds to anyone, ever, especially Lan Zhan, too afraid of what they would recognize in him.

"I saw no such thing." Lan Zhan set his jaw, his lower lip sticking out slightly. The urge to poke it was buried beneath guilt, wringing out his internal organs like a wet cloth.

How could Lan Zhan still not see? Wei Wuxian had known they should have talked before taking their bows, if Lan Zhan didn't understand the truth of his terrible potential — but he'd promised himself he wouldn't let Lan Zhan go without a fight again. So he swallowed his panic, and tried to explain. Maybe, he told himself, maybe Lan Zhan could love him despite his flaws too. "I turned to resentment just to save my grandmother, not the world. If there had been a rampaging beast? And I didn't know the risks, or if I didn't have time to figure out another way, I would have done exactly what Xue Chonghai did. I could have created the Yin Iron."

"You would have harnessed the power of the Xuanwu of Slaughter, yes," Lan Zhan agreed.

Relief washed over him. "See, Lan Zhan, I --

"No, I do not see." Lan Zhan squeezed his hands hard enough to hurt, so Wei Wuxian could not pull away or hide if he wanted to. "The Yin Iron influenced him, but he made his choices. Lan Yi handled the Yin Iron and yet withstood its suggestions. Xue Chonghai created the Yin Iron out of desperation, but he did not try to hide it away or destroy it. He continued to use it long after he recognized its corrupting influence. In the end, he chose power for the sake of it.

You would not let innocents die for the sake of power. You would die before you killed them.”

“Ah.” His mouth fell open.

“I know you, Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan said, and he did. He saw to the heart of Wei Wuxian as no one ever had. “That is why it hurt so much, to learn how much you hid from me. I do not need to be protected.”

Lan Zhan had never needed to be protected from the world, but Wei Wuxian finally understood that Lan Zhan did not need to be protected from him, either. “No. You don’t.”

“I only need you to treat me like your husband, like the equal you have named me.” Lan Zhan stared down at their joined hands. His grip loosened, but Wei Wuxian held fast.

“Zhiji,” he whispered, and Lan Zhan looked up at him, eyes shining. It was a promise, and a confession, a conveyance of everything he needed to say. But Lan Zhan deserved to hear the long version anyway. “I am so sorry I hurt you, so sorry I let my fear of your reaction get in the way of treating you the way you deserve. I’m sorry I assumed your rejection, even after I knew you were open minded and kind, before all else. I’m sorry, and I —”

Wei Wuxian drew in a ragged breath.

“Often, when people make up after a betrayal of this level, they ask if they can start over. But Lan Zhan, I don’t want to start over. Every moment we’ve spent together means the world to me. I don’t want to try to forget and start again, I want to grow with you.”

“I forgave you, I have not forgotten. You will not hide anything more important than a surprise gift from me again.” It wasn’t an order, but a statement. Like he somehow already trusted that Wei Wuxian would not make the same mistake again.

“If I did not learn after nearly losing you once, then I’m hopeless.” He cracked a momentary lopsided smile, but quickly sobered, needing Lan Zhan to know how serious he was. “I won’t waste this second chance. I already don’t deserve this much.”

“That is not for you to decide.” Lan Zhan tilted his chin up. His beautiful husband. Stubborn, and holding back tears. “I wish you would have told me.”

“I wish I had too.” How much pain could have been avoided, if Wei Wuxian had gone against his instincts, and confided in him? At the very least, Wei Wuxian could let him know how much of a mess he had been, every step of the way, how he’d let this go on for so long.

“When I found you, I knew I needed you. I didn’t know I would love you. Or that you would love me. Though maybe part of me knew how much you would mean to me long before I did. I didn’t intend to keep it from you this long, either. I thought we’d destroy the Yin Iron before we got married, at first, and you’d have a chance to decide whether to go through with it, after. Then they made us marry as a condition of taking it, and we slept together, and the Yin Iron was stolen and — and I was scared. I thought anything you were willing to share with me for a short time was better than nothing and —”

Freeing one of his hands, Wei Wuxian reached into his inner robe, which Waipo thankfully had not forced him to change, and into the little makeshift pocket he'd sewn there. He hooked the loop of the protective charm Lan Zhan had thrown back at him around his finger, and drew it out, letting it dangle where Lan Zhan could see.

“As I’m sure my grandmothers have told you many times while you were planning this surprise wedding, I was an idiot. But you’ve married me twice now, so I suppose if you’ll have me, I’m your idiot. And I promise, I will do what I’ve really wanted since the day you woke in my bed, and tell you everything, however unimportant.”

Rather than take it, Lan Zhan clasped his hand between both of his, and drew it to his mouth, pressing his lips to the place where the charm wrapped around Wei Wuxian’s finger. Drawing back, he smiled with tears shining in the corners of his eyes. “We were inevitable.”

Wei Wuxian sniffled, and wiped a tear from Lan Zhan’s cheek, leaving his own to stream down his face. “Maybe you’re right. How could I not fall in love with you, after all? You never once looked at me with fear in your eyes. You flirted with me almost before I flirted with you, and then fought me to a draw. You challenged your own beliefs, stood up for me even when it might have been better not to, even when it forced you to argue with your brother. I’ve seen you cut off limbs and cradle bunnies, You let me tease you yet turn around and publicly lie about my sexual prowess —”

“It is not a lie.” The line of Lan Zhan’s mouth was firm, challenging.

Immensely tempting.

“That night it was.”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan sighed with fond exasperation. One of Wei Wuxian’s favorite sounds, and he’d never thought to hear it again.

He was giddy, smiling through tears, and all he wanted was to make Lan Zhan say his name again and again. “I know, I was doing so well. And then I said *sexual prowess* —”

“Wei Ying,” Lan Zhan said again, and kissed him. Any more words Wei Ying had to describe him died in his mouth, but he tried to convey them in the movements of his lips, in the slide of their tongues, with each nip of his teeth as he trailed his way down Lan Zhan’s throat, so the next words Lan Zhan spoke began on a breathy gasp. “That was perfect.”

## Chapter End Notes

I can't exactly promise everything's smooth sailing from here, but the Wangxian angst is finally at an end 🍷

[Twitter Promo](#)

# Chapter 24

## Chapter Summary

Wangxian have their second wedding night, and Wei Wuxian forgets about Jin Zixuan's news

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** Almost this entire chapter is smut, ft. light bondage, edging tickle torture, lwj says stop and there's a check in before continuing, discussion of possible future CNC roleplay (not detailed). If you want to skip the smut, jump to: "Lan Wangji woke to a loud banging sound."

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wei Wuxian had created a monster.

Okay, maybe not created a monster — Lan Zhan had been enthusiastic and insatiable since their first wedding night — but he had certainly unleashed one. If Wei Wuxian had never shown him the spring book of the emperor and the spy, maybe they would be having nice, relaxing make-up sex in bed. Or maybe Lan Zhan would have been bored, and called Wei Wuxian out on his secret keeping earlier.

Who knew?

Lan Zhan squirmed around in the tiny meditation nook until he was precariously perched on Wei Wuxian's lap, shifting against him as they kissed so Wei Wuxian could feel his erection pressed against his own hardening cock. Lan Zhan slipped a hand between them to palm his cock through the robes, and Wei Wuxian's head snapped back to bang into the wall.

The pillow under Wei Wuxian slipped, and Lan Zhan bit his lip hard enough Wei Wuxian's mouth flooded with the taste of copper. As he tried to catch his balance, his elbow slammed hard into the wall behind him. The wood splintered beneath it.

"We should move or there will be more than one elbow-shaped hole in your poor meditation nook." Wei Wuxian glanced at his elbow, where a minor scrape was already closing. "And possibly your poor husband."

Lan Zhan snickered at him, and quickly hid it, but his eyes were bright and dancing.

“Hey,” Wei Wuxian said, grabbing Lan Zhan’s hands away from his kiss-swollen mouth. “Is your husband not allowed to see you laugh?”

“It’s...” Lan Zhan looked down. Searching for words. “Habit. Discipline.”

A failure of teaching discipline, more like, part of the way Lan Zhan been taught to maintain constant control himself down to the muscles of his face. It wasn’t surprising, given how long it had taken Lan Zhan to smile at him with more than a twitch of his lips, that this was the first time Wei Wuxian had heard him laugh, with even this short, choked up amusement. “Habits are hard to break. And I won’t make you do anything you don’t want to, but you never have to control yourself around me. I love all of you.”

Lan Zhan looked down. “I may need help.”

“Look at us, communicating.” Wei Wuxian placed a forefinger beneath Lan Zhan’s chin, tilting it up so Lan Zhan was forced to meet his gaze. “And, on that note. Lan Zhan, I may have a hard time believing you love me at times, or accepting gifts. It’s the time I spent on the street, I think. You don’t have to do anything, it’ll get easier the longer we’re together —”

He cut himself off at Lan Zhan’s frown.

“I will tell you, show you, until you believe me. I love you, Wei Ying.”

It was so very hard to believe, especially now, after all he had done. But Wei Wuxian couldn’t insult Lan Zhan by doubting him. He could only share more of the ways he loved him. “I should probably also confess how much time I’ve spent sketching you when I was supposed to be working.”

An unconscious smile spread across Lan Zhan’s parted lips, and Wei Wuxian had to kiss him before he came aware of it, preserving Lan Zhan’s joy on his tongue.

The cushion started to slip again, and they pulled apart.

“Bed,” they said at the same time, and Lan Zhan’s mouth contorted with a suppressed laugh.

Lan Zhan stood without letting go of his hands, and used the momentum to pull Wei Wuxian up with him. Wei Wuxian laughed, for the first time in forever, as Lan Zhan tugged him toward the bed. They sat there, side by side, on a sex sheet that had been set out beforehand, neither quite knowing how to make the first move.

Wei Wuxian could stare at his husband forever. But the guan on Lan Zhan’s head had to be heavy, with so many inlaid stones. Whatever Wen Qing had put his hair up with certainly was.

“Let me look at you. I want to soak in every detail of what you look like tonight. After all, how many wedding nights will we have?”

“Two.”



His Lan Zhan, still so funny. “True. But this is the one that matters most. Even we renew our vows every century, every decade, every year, this will always be the night you first told me you loved me.”

He leaned in and kissed Lan Zhan softly, pulling away before it could turn heated. Cupping the back of Lan Zhan’s head, he rubbed his thumbs along his temples, and kissed his forehead. The guan holding back Lan Zhan’s hair was intricate work with a central garnet surrounded by golden petals that expanded in fragile spirals, inlaid with gems that decreased in size as the petals thinned. Lan Zhan hadn’t chosen a symbol of his natal sect but a spider lily, the new sigil of Yiling Wei for their wedding.

Yiling Wei was their sect, they had built it together, and Lan Zhan asserted his rightful place with that guan, saying *this is where I belong*.

Wei Wuxian slipped the pin loose, and eased the guan out of Lan Zhan’s hair. He turned it around in his hands, inspecting the metalwork. “You know, I bet we’re the only sect leaders in history to have our people decide our sigil without so much as a chance to veto. I’m beginning to suspect we’re not really in charge of anything. Did they have these ready and waiting for you?”

With a hint of shyness, Lan Zhan admitted. “The goldsmiths were already working on a pair in silver, but I asked them to make these first.”

Even though neither of them wore gold on a regular basis, Lan Zhan had chosen the frivolous over the practical. Because marrying Wei Wuxian was important to him.

“These? Do I match?” Wei Wuxian reached up, and found the spindly metal petals of a spider lily rising high above his head. “I was poked and prodded while blindfolded, so I have no idea what I’m wearing.”

“We match.” Lan Zhan reached out to remove his guan in turn, the charm Wei Wuxian had returned to him dangling from his wrist. They set the pair, side by side, on an empty spot on the nearest shelf where they glittered like crowns. Lan Zhan’s belongings had been put back in their places, sometime between when Wei Wuxian left that afternoon and their return, leaving just enough space for their wedding robes.

And, he noted, the lid of their toy box had been pointedly removed, a jar of lubricant sitting in pride of place within a coil of blood-red rope. Next to it sat a tray of sliced fruit, nuts, and candies with a steaming, talisman-heated teapot.

*Someone* had been very confident the wedding would go as planned, though he couldn’t imagine Lan Zhan making so public a gesture of reconciliation if he wasn’t certain. Later, he would have to ask how Lan Zhan had gone from certain Wei Wuxian’s feelings were false, to this.

Later.

For now, Wei Wuxian turned his attention to removing Lan Zhan’s belt. It came apart with surprising ease in his hands, and all three layers of robes fell open. He set it aside, running his

hands over the parted collar, all the way down to the waist. “And this robe, what a masterpiece, was it the same couple who made our emergency set?”

“Yes,” Lan Zhan tilted his head back, his voice turning breathy as Wei Wuxian bent to trail his lips along his jaw. “They wished to dress us with their true capabilities.”

“Everything is beautiful. I couldn’t have planned so perfect a wedding for you.” Wei Wuxian pulled back to meet Lan Zhan’s eyes, his fingers slipping beneath Lan Zhan’s innermost robe to rest gently at his waist. Lan Zhan shivered, his eyelids fluttering closed. “I like that you know what you want. I love that it’s me. I love you, Lan Zhan.”

Lan Zhan surged forward to kiss him, his hands grasping at Wei Wuxian’s arms for balance, only barely stopping them both from tilting backwards onto the floor. Wei Wuxian laughed against his mouth, pushing Lan Zhan backward even as he pushed his robes off his shoulders. He pulled away just before Lan Zhan’s back hit the mattress, narrowly avoiding knocking their teeth together, and pressed his lips to Lan Zhan’s jaw.

Ever obliging, Lan Zhan tilted his head back to give Wei Wuxian access to his neck. Wei Wuxian trailed light, open mouthed kisses down the side, and then along Lan Zhan’s collarbone, skimming his hands along his sides.

But after a moment, Lan Zhan sighed, and it was not the bliss Wei Wuxian would have hoped for. “Wei Ying, what are you doing?”

Frowning, Wei Wuxian pulled back. “Making love to you?”

“Like that?” Lan Zhan’s used the tone of supreme judgment he usually reserved for arrogant Jins.

“Wow, okay. Message received.” He sat back on his heels, and was relieved to find the corners of Lan Zhan’s eyes crinkling as he covered a quiet laugh with his hand. Wei Wuxian wanted to see it. “I thought slow and romantic might be nice, after how long it’s been. And for our wedding night.”

“You said you did not want to forget, that you want to grow with me. I want that too.” Lan Zhan’s expression went sly. “And I have not been touching myself.”

Wei Wuxian sucked in a breath. It was a specific request, yet left room for Wei Wuxian to decide how to meet it. He did love a challenge. He kissed Lan Zhan again, this time hard and bruising. “A month is a long time to hold yourself back. If I order you not to come until I give you permission, are you sure you can handle it? ”

“Make me let go, Wei Ying.”

His Lan Zhan, always so firm and certain.

“Okay. Okay.” Thoughts rushed through his head, half baked ideas on how to make the night perfect when Lan Zhan was in the mood for edging, yet had come close to rubbing off in his wedding robes on Wei Wuxian’s lap only minutes before. Not exactly a ringing endorsement

of Lan Zhan's current capability of restraint. But there *was* something Lan Zhan had asked for a while back...

Wei Wuxian rolled off his husband, and sprawled back on his hands. His voice dropped into the low, authoritative tone Lan Zhan liked so much as he ordered, "Take off the rest of your clothes, and lay back down."

Lan Zhan managed to make jumping to his feet look graceful, but not getting his pants tangled around his ankles in his eagerness. When Lan Zhan lay back down, Wei Wuxian rose, and perused their toy box at his leisure. The lubricant, he tossed onto the bed, and it rolled to a rest by Lan Zhan's hip. Lan Zhan twitched, starting to reach for it, but thought better of it.

"That's my good boy. Spread your arms and legs, and wait for me." Wei Wuxian discarded a length of rope, too long for his purposes tonight, and picked up two others. He pushed further into the box, past the paddle and floggers he wouldn't feel right using tonight, and found a slightly dented feather he couldn't remember placing there. With a plan taking shape, Wei Wuxian palmed the feather, tucking it out of Lan Zhan's view against his forearm. "Unless you've changed your mind?"

Silently petulant, Lan Zhan shook his head.

"I didn't think so." Wei Wuxian undid the storage knot on one of the ropes one handed, and let it dangle where Lan Zhan could see while he stashed the feather in the sheets. Pulling the rope taut between his fists, he bent over Lan Zhan to secure his wrists to the bedframe. The rope running through his fingers grounded him, slotting Wei Wuxian back into the role he played best. Slipping two fingers beneath the rope to check his work, he felt the hammering of Lan Zhan's pulse.

With one hand bound to either side of the bed, Lan Zhan could not hide his expressions. Wei Wuxian would be able to see how he felt, ensure that this time, what Lan Zhan said and what he felt aligned.

Lan Zhan tested the give of his bonds, and let his head fall back, his hair spread out in a cloud around his head. Utterly content, looking up at Wei Wuxian through half-lidded eyes, though his cock lay heavy against his belly from nothing more than anticipation.

The sight of his husband naked and bound was intoxicating. It always was. But they would both have to wait a short while longer.

Wei Wuxian liked the sort of powerful that plucking the strings of Lan Zhan's body while he himself remained fully clothed made him feel, and he knew Lan Zhan basked in the performance of Wei Wuxian having him at his mercy. But Wei Wuxian was not going to risk getting cum all over his wedding robes. Or letting them wrinkle on the floor.

He stood again, and unfastened his belt. Folding it in two, Wei Wuxian set it down on the shelf. A glance over at Lan Zhan revealed he was already pouting at his delay. Wei Wuxian hid his smile as he removed his outer robe, and held it up to inspect the embroidery. It was a match for Lan Zhan's, down to the positioning of each bird.

Faced with Lan Zhan's beauty, Wei Wuxian had not bothered to look down at his own robes earlier. But Lan Zhan had put so much detail into their crafting, in ensuring they looked like a pair bound by the red string of fate. One such string must exist between them, or they could not have ended up here, together.

"Wei Ying." Lan Zhan tried to get his elbows under him, but the ropes were taut, and he fell back against the bed, disgruntled.

"These robes are special. If I know my husband, he did far more than arrange for these to be made. He looked over every detail of the design, making sure it was exactly what he wanted." Wei Wuxian bent over Lan Zhan to flick a pebbled nipple with a fingernail, and went back to folding his robe. "I want to keep them for as many centuries as they can possibly last. So you can be patient while I put them away properly, can't you? Answer me, Lan Zhan."

"Yes."

"Yes, what?"

"Yes, I can be patient."

"Good boy."

Wei Wuxian picked up Lan Zhan's discarded robes from the floor, and folded them over his arm before stowing them with the others. But Wei Wuxian's own ordinary inner robe and pants he simply shucked off and left on the floor, in a hurry to settle himself between Lan Zhan's legs despite his demands for patience.

It had been a long time for Wei Wuxian, too. Not even the fading scent on his pillow had been able to stir him to interest when he thought he had lost Lan Zhan forever. The last time they'd lain in bed together, neither of them enjoyed it. Lan Zhan cried, and not because he was overwhelmed with pleasure, while Wei Wuxian felt sick to his stomach. Staying in their rooms alone had been a way of punishing himself.

But now they could make new memories in their bed, full of love and laughter. If Wei Wuxian still felt that self-inflicted punishment was merited, he could replace that partial self-imposed seclusion with doing better, starting today.

Where to start but with a kiss?

Lan Zhan yielded to the press of his lips, lips parting for Wei Wuxian to plunge deep toward the back of his throat, fucking his mouth with his tongue until Lan Zhan moaned. Lan Zhan did so love for his mouth to be full of his husband. This was what Lan Zhan had been missing, and when Wei Wuxian began to pull back, Lan Zhan did not let him go without a sharp, playful bite to his lower lip.

Wei Wuxian's tongue darted out to sooth the sting. "Behave," he scolded. Lan Zhan settled, waiting for Wei Wuxian's next move, though there was still a hint of challenge in his eyes.

The skin of Lan Zhan's neck was an unblemished expanse. As Wei Wuxian set his lips and teeth to mapping himself across his husband, he realized how much he had been holding himself back earlier, how much he needed this too. It had been too long since Lan Zhan was decorated in his marks. He wanted Lan Zhan to mark him in return, even if they wouldn't last. But later, perhaps when they were lazy and sated, and Lan Zhan might fall asleep with the meat of his shoulder in his mouth.

Wei Wuxian shifted his weight off his husband to lie by his side, but any protest Lan Zhan might have had was stymied by Wei Wuxian's mouth on his collarbone, his hand skimming up his thigh, over his cock to wrap around its slick head. Lan Zhan was already leaking enough to ease the way. Wei Wuxian jerked him off rough and quick, the wet sound of each stroke audible over Lan Zhan's heavy, uneven breathing and drawn-out moans.

"So wet for me already, it wouldn't take much to make you come, whether you want to or not." At that, Lan Zhan whimpered, and arched off the bed to fuck, just once, into his hand. Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue, chastising him. "But you'll give me warning, won't you? You'll try your hardest to be good for me."

Lan Zhan made a sound that might have been confirmation, but might have been his response to Wei Wuxian catching his nipple between his teeth. Wei Wuxian bit down, his fist moving faster.

"I'm close," Lan Zhan warned, and another dribble of precum spilled over onto Wei Wuxian's hand. He let go, letting Lan Zhan's cock bounce wetly against his belly. Lan Zhan snapped his legs together, clenching his ass cheeks in his effort to regain control, and Wei Wuxian pinched the closer one, shocking him into relaxing. But it was past the point of danger, and Lan Zhan kept his word, and did not come.

Wei Wuxian was feeling gentle today, despite Lan Zhan's wishes, and so he did not slap his cock before he took hold and began anew at a merciless pace.

Lan Zhan screwed his eyes and mouth shut, holding back his noises as he tried to slow the build toward release.

That could not be allowed.

Wei Wuxian let go, and before Lan Zhan could do anything but make a confused noise of blended relief and displeasure, Wei Wuxian grabbed his chin with the same, pre-cum coated hand and Lan Zhan's eyes flew open.

"Look at me. Don't hide your noises. Or I stop. Got it?"

Lan Zhan licked his lips. Once, twice, and his gaze sharpened. "Yes, Wei Ying."

Slow to reply, but still entirely present. Wei Wuxian would simply have to work harder.

A glistening residue lingered on Lan Zhan's chin when he returned to pumping Lan Zhan's cock. Wei Wuxian licked off a stripe with a slow swipe, the salty taste enhanced by sweat

beading on the skin, and felt the vibrations of a moan through his tongue. “My husband still tastes delicious. Nothing and no one in the world can match the way you taste.”

“You haven’t —” Lan Zhan gasped out. “—tasted anyone else. You said.”

“I don’t have to taste anyone else to know you’re my favorite flavor.

Lan Zhan shivered violently, and Wei Wuxian nearly didn’t remove his hand in time, neither expecting him to near his peak so soon, but Lan Zhan bit his lip and whined, and his shaking gradually subsided.

As soon as Lan Zhan came down from the edge, Wei Wuxian forced Lan Zhan’s legs apart, climbing back between them to slide his lips over Lan Zhan’s cock. He bobbed his head, pausing at random to suck on the tip or to tease with his tongue. His hands squeezed tight around Lan Zhan’s thighs, hard enough to leave prints that would last until morning. His husband was delectable, so much so it was rapidly becoming a distraction for Wei Wuxian, and he didn’t want this to end so soon for either of them.

Wei Wuxian let his own hips grind down into the bed just once to relieve the increasing demands of his cock, and took Lan Zhan in until the tip hit the back of his throat.

“Wei Ying, can I — ” Lan Zhan cut off in a long whine, his heels scrabbling at the sheets.

He let Lan Zhan slip from his mouth with a wet pop, and raised himself up to watch the exquisite anguish play across his features. Wei Wuxian stroked along the right-hand divot of Lan Zhan’s hips until he stopped shaking, leaving light kisses in the wake of his thumb.

“Regretting asking me to edge you already? Just say the word, admit you can’t hold back much longer, and I’ll let you come on my cock. But I’ll fuck you slow and gentle, the way my Zhanzhan was so grumpy about.” It felt incredible to be able to call Lan Zhan by a nickname, especially in the middle of a game, and not feel like he was only hurting them both.

Lan Zhan was panting and flushed, and his thighs twitched without the slightest touch, aftershocks without the release. But without hesitation, he shook his head. “Never.”

“This is a challenge, Zhanzhan, can you handle the consequences if you don’t win?” Wei Wuxian pushed himself up on his elbows, and found the lubricant among the tangled sheets. He scooped up a generous helping and rubbed it between his fingers where Lan Zhan could see. With his other hand, he found the feather and skimmed it briefly along the outer edge of Lan Zhan’s thigh, where he was sensitive, but not too much so. “Even if it’s something unexpected?”

Lan Zhan twitched, but held firm. His “yes” challenged Wei Wuxian to do his worse, despite the strain in his voice.

“I hope so, because I can keep this up all night.” Letting the feather go, Wei Wuxian braced himself on Lan Zhan’s thigh, and rubbed two fingers around Lan Zhan’s rim, mouthing at the base of Lan Zhan’s cock as he took his time teasing the muscle into relaxation. Lan Zhan’s

breathing grew ragged once more before Wei Wuxian pushed his fingers inside, crooked them to rub the prostate with every movement.

As Wei Wuxian built up a rhythm, he moved to suck gently on the soft skin of his balls. And With Wei Wuxian's fingers inside him, it took hardly any time at all before Lan Zhan was pleading with him for permission to come yet again, sobbing in frustration when Wei Wuxian denied him.

Wei Wuxian crawled up Lan Zhan's body, kissing or nipping every love bite he had left earlier along the way until he reached his lips. Lan Zhan kissed him back like he was starving, like if he pleased Wei Wuxian well enough, permission would be granted for his release. But tonight, the rules of the game were different.

Lan Zhan accepted him inside easily, hungrily, with a single thrust. And though Wei Wuxian had planned to take him by surprise, launching right into a punishing pace, he was forced to pause, resting his forehead on Lan Zhan's shoulder, to keep himself from losing control from the heat of his gorgeous, unparalleled husband. Wei Wuxian couldn't believe how lucky he was for Lan Zhan to forgive him, to still want him. After everything. It was almost too much.

But Lan Zhan wrapped his legs around him, urging him to do *something*, and this was about satisfying *him*. So Wei Wuxian forced himself under control, and began to thrust, speeding up his pace as he grew more certain of himself.

Lan Zhan let his head loll back against the mattress, giving way to Wei Wuxian's thrusts. His mouth fell open, no longer able to summon the energy to kiss back. But he *did* recover enough to beg by the time his thighs began to shake.

"Can I come? Please let me come." Lan Zhan tugged on the ropes, rocking against him..

"No," Wei Wuxian said, without slowing his pace.

"*Please*." Lan Zhan's voice cracked in the middle of the word. "Wei Ying, why?"

"Are you arguing with me?" Wei Wuxian rubbed beneath the head of Lan Zhan's cock pointedly, dragging *ah-ah-ahs* of protest out of him. "Isn't this what you wanted?"

Lan Zhan paused mid shake of his head, his mouth forming a silent "Oh" of realization. He stopped struggling, his arms relaxing in their bonds. He tightened his legs around Wei Wuxian's back, forcing him deeper. At this angle, Wei Wuxian could only grind against Lan Zhan's prostate, his hand trapped between their bodies. That was what Lan Zhan needed, slipping further under, every circle of his thumb, of his hips chipping away at the last of his control. Of both of their control.

"I can't, I can't, Wei Ying, I'm going to —" Lan Zhan squeezed his eyes shut as a spasm swept through him, the beginnings of an orgasm he tried fruitlessly to hold back.

"Don't." Wei Wuxian kept driving into him, scarcely remembering to breathe, his grip around Lan Zhan's cock as tight as he liked. He forced his head to stay up, and his eyes open wanting nothing more than to watch, as Lan Zhan unraveled around him.

His mouth opened in a scream that he quickly lost the voice for. The sight of Lan Zhan throwing his head back as he disobeyed, consumed with pleasure and clenching around him sent Wei Wuxian over the edge after him. Even with his head spinning from the force of his orgasm, he fucked Lan Zhan through it, slowing until he stilled, and they were breathing heavily into each other's mouths with their foreheads pressed together.

Wei Wuxian let his weight collapse onto his husband's chest. Lan Zhan liked to surface entangled in him. For months, Wei Wuxian had assumed it was the skin-to-skin contact, but now, he considered for the first time that Lan Zhan wanted that contact *because* it came from him. That Wei Wuxian was an exception to his dislike of touch not just because they were sexually intimate, but because Lan Zhan loved him. That they had both assumed that post-coital intimacy to be an illusion, but it was real, and they wanted it for the same reasons.

"Was it good?" Wei Wuxian asked into his ear when he began to stir.

Lan Zhan groaned, a wordless confirmation.

"Was it worth coming without permission?" With a nip at Lan Zhan's earlobe, Wei Wuxian pushed himself up, and pushed Lan Zhan's thighs closer together so he could straddle them. He grabbed a loose corner of sheets, and wiped the cum from Lan Zhan's belly, the gentleness of the motion at odds with his tone. "You promised you could hold off."

*You did that on purpose*, Lan Zhan accused with his eyes, spirited even in his languorous afterglow. Relaxed in his bonds, but with an air of anticipation. Not a single sign of distress.

"Don't pretend this isn't what you asked me for. But it still begs the question — whatever shall I do with you now?" Wei Wuxian felt among the sheets for the feather, which had ended up trapped half-beneath Lan Zhan as the sheets bunched from his squirming. It was a little squished, but usable, so he traced the tip just below Lan Zhan's collarbone.

Lan Zhan sealed his lips tight, but it only muffled his startled shriek.

Wei Wuxian clicked his tongue, scolding, and flicked the feather over a nipple, making Lan Zhan's hips cant upwards. "None of that, Zhanzhan, I always want to hear you."

"What kind of punishment is this?"

"Who said it's punishment? Maybe I just wanted an excuse to learn what your laugh sounds like."

A series of emotions flickered over Lan Zhan's face — surprise, uncertainty, desire — and settled on plain, undisguised love.

"Ah," Wei Wuxian ran his thumb over Lan Zhan's lips. "I'm the luckiest man in the world."

Lan Zhan was already flushed from exertion, but his flush darkened further, and he mumbled something against Wei Wuxian's thumb that might have been *no, I am*, right before he tried to distract Wei Wuxian by trapping his thumb between his lips.



Wei Wuxian let him think he'd won for a short moment before retrieving his thumb, and patting his cheek. "You're indulging me with all this naughtiness today, Zhanzhan. But you're not getting out of this."

Lan Zhan glared up at him.

Before proceeding, Wei Wuxian checked to make sure the bonds around Lan Zhan's wrists still had enough give, and that he was able to wrap his fingers around Wei Wuxian's. Lan Zhan would be pulling against them more soon enough. Then he set to tickling Lan Zhan's left side with light, skimming touches of the feather.

Lan Zhan couldn't cover his squeak, or the uncontrolled giggles that followed. "Wei Ying stop it, stop."

Wei Wuxian stilled, the feather just above Lan Zhan's navel. "You know what to say if you really want me to stop."

Shaking his head, Lan Zhan lay back, letting his muscles relax into softness, concrete permission to continue. Lan Zhan bit his lip and whined as Wei Wuxian flicked the feather over and around his navel, then down his pelvis, and up along his side. His abs contracted convulsively as he gasped for air between shrieks of laughter. Uninhibited and beautiful and so much more than Wei Wuxian had ever dreamed of.

He trailed the feather along one thigh then the other, and moved back to his tits. Let him build up a false sense of security, before suddenly switching tactics, and running it along Lan Zhan's cock from base to tip. Lan Zhan shrieked, trying to buck Wei Wuxian off of his thighs, but there was nowhere he could move. A patch of the fluffy barbules were damp when Wei Wuxian pulled the feather away.

"Look Lan Zhan." Wei Wuxian held the feather up close between Lan Zhan's eyes. Lan Zhan furrowed his brow as he tried to focus on it, though his eyes would not cross. "You wrecked my tool. Should I use my hands on you now?"

Lan Zhan's eyes widened in panic, assuming he meant a more intense tickling session. "Wei Ying —"

But Wei Wuxian threw the feather aside, and wrapped his hand around Lan Zhan's cock, leaning down to press a soft kiss to Lan Zhan's lips. As he drew away, he began pumping his hand along Lan Zhan's length. "Don't hold back this time, just relax, let yourself go."

Lan Zhan shuddered, and gave into the sensation, to every touch Wei Wuxian inflicted upon him as he lavished his head with soft kisses. Though he had discarded the feather, Lan Zhan jumped whenever he was kissed in a new place, like he'd been shocked, drawing out his rise toward his peak.

"See, Lan Zhan?" Wei Wuxian said against his breast bone. "You do like when I'm gentle."

Lan Zhan started to grumble, but it turned into a moan as his orgasm took them both by surprise.

“I love your smile, and the sound of your laugh,” Wei Wuxian whispered in Lan Zhan’s ear as he stroked him through the aftershocks. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

Lan Wangji hadn’t felt this way... ever.

He was weightless and free in Wei Ying’s arms. That much was familiar, but the soreness of his cheeks and the ache of his sides was entirely new. It was as though the muscles of his face had relaxed past some block that had been there for as long as Lan Wangji could remember, and now he would succumb to a fit of giggles if Wei Ying said the sky was blue.

Tickling with a feather was mild, compared to much of what Wei Ying had done to him, yet it felt like a new level of intimacy. A part of him he had not realized existed had been set free under Wei Ying’s hands, and Lan Wangji did not want to hide it away again.

Lan Wangji would not have been comfortable with this before he knew the truth. But now, it felt right.

Wei Ying offered him a sip of tea, holding the cup to his lips, and Lan Wangji had to focus to prevent some of the liquid from dribbling out the sides of his mouth. Though his arms were unbound, it was not worth the effort of moving them to hold the cup himself, so he let Wei Ying tilt it for him with each swallow, despite the trickle of liquid down his chin and chest.

When the cup was empty, Wei Ying offered him a dragon’s beard candy — Lan Wangji had preserved the short-lived candy of spun sugar and peanut dust by talisman — and he took a bite. Peanut dust cascaded down his chest, but he closed his eyes in bliss, only to startle at the touch of Wei Ying’s tongue. Lan Wangji giggled helplessly as Wei Ying licked the dust off him, the feeling in his chest like bubbles blown in water still foreign.

His mouth was dry, then, but Wei Ying anticipated it, and helped him drink another cup of tea.

Lan Wangji licked his lips, catching a stray speck of sugar, hoping it would make Wei Ying kiss him. Wei Ying placed a peanut between his teeth, and leaned in to do so, slipping the peanut into Lan Wangji’s mouth with his tongue. He chewed, swallowed, and then they were lying on their sides, flush against each other. Wei Ying smiled at him, brilliantly, wondrously happy. It was nothing short of a miracle that they were here, together, so short a time after Lan Wangji thought he was walking away for good. But Lan Wangji felt he could ask Wei Ying anything, tell him anything, and he would not be refused.

He found he had only a few questions remaining.

“You called me Zhanzhan?”

“Did you not like it?” Wei Ying bit his lip, and something fizzled in Lan Wangji’s mind. It took him a moment to drag himself back to answer.

“I like anything you call me.” It was a very sweet endearment. “But I thought, when you called me Hanguang-jun...”

Wei Ying went from nervous to teasing in an instant. “You thought what?”

“...Roleplay.”

“Like the stories people tell Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Laozu outside our little corner of the world? You, my blushing young groom, and me, the evil immortal who can’t resist you?” Wei Ying wiggled his brows, wicked and teasing in exactly the way Lan Wangji loved best.

“Yes.”

Wei Ying giggled, but quickly sobered.

“Lan Zhan, I promised to tell you the truth, and...” Wei Ying drew in a steady breath. “I was trying to keep something of myself distant when I used your title. But I don’t *have* to use it that way, and if you want to act out the fantasy, well, I think I can manage to play the menacing captor. We do have those brand-new thrones to break in. Perhaps I’ve snatched you from a night hunt after admiring your beauty and skill, and now you’re bound at my feet.”

Despite how thoroughly Wei Ying had wrung him out, Lan Wangji felt his cock begin to stir. Wei Ying did not seem to notice, just yet, continuing to rub circles into the ever-tense muscles that ran alongside his spine with forefinger and thumb. “I would like that.”

“When the decor and tunnels are finished, then, so we don’t traumatize any late-night workers. But there are plenty of *other* things we can do in the meantime...”

Wei Ying trailed off, and they lay there in silence for a long moment more, thoroughly entangled. Lan Wangji’s mind started drifting slowly toward the embrace of sleep, but his body was still alight at every point of contact. So he tightened his grip on Wei Ying’s hip and ass, the feeling of his fingers sinking into muscle keeping him awake, and asked, “Is there anything you fantasize about, that we have not done?”

Wei Ying hesitated, but only to organize his thoughts. “I like you being naughty, sometimes. Making you fall apart after you’ve disobeyed me is... indescribably heady. Tonight was *very* good for me if you were wondering.”

At those words, Lan Wangji felt himself giggle, more than heard it. Hopefully Wei Ying had not broken his self-control permanently. How would Lan Wangji tell off incompetents effectively?

“There is one thing, though. Would you... model for me?”

Wei Ying could order Lan Wangji to do any number of filthy things without a second thought, yet hesitated at asking to draw him — and did not even specify drawing him naked. As if Lan Wangji would deny him anything in his power to give.

It was, perhaps, a more intimate request, something Wei Ying told himself he could not have. Had Lan Wangji not seen the love in those sketches, missed it only because of how hurt he

had been? Lan Wangji would be fully exposed under his husband's discerning gaze, posing immobile as every detail of him was rendered in ink. The thought only made Lan Wangji desire it more.

"I found the sketches, with your notebook. I kept one."

Wei Ying hid his face in the sheets, but neither his efforts nor the dim lamplight hid the flush of his cheeks. "I take it that means you like them?"

Lan Zhan hummed his agreement, and Wei Ying's cock twitched against his hip.

"I will never succeed in capturing your beauty on the page, but I will strive to get closer every time."

Lan Wangji snorted softly, though his ears and neck heated. Wei Ying's smirk said it showed. A change of subject was required, for Lan Wangji did have one more question, before he was ready to finish the night with the sort of sex with which Wei Ying had tried to start it.

"Earlier, you said... every century?"

Wei Ying hummed his confirmation.

"You are that certain I will achieve immortality?" What he was really asking was, *you are that certain you will want me for centuries?*

"You survived Xue Chonghai's attack and," Wei Ying placed two fingers to feel the thumping of Lan Wangji's pulse not at his wrist, but at his throat. "Not only that, but you made a full recovery in under a month. Maybe strangers will think *you're* the gege before you stop aging. But what do a handful of years and the opinions of strangers matter when we have each other? So long as Lan Zhan is clear I'm his gege no matter how fresh-faced and dewy eyed I am."

Lan Wangji rolled his eyes at the term. "Wei-gege is too wicked for such a description."

"You..." Wei Ying sputtered, struggling to breathe like he had just been punched in the solar plexus. "Are you flirting with your poor, unprepared husband? Don't you know I'm already smitten?"

"Wei-gege could make it more clear." Lan Wangji looked up at Wei Ying from under his lashes, setting off another wave of sputtering. It was immensely satisfying to see his flirt of a husband so flustered, and to have the courage to use an endearment on him beyond his birth name.

Perhaps he should save up his uses, so Wei Ying could not get used to it. Unless Wei Ying *asked* him to call him Wei-gege in bed, for Lan Wangji would be helpless to resist.

When Wei Ying finished pounding the flat of his hand against his chest, his mouth split into a lopsided grin. "Lan Zhan, more?"

"Earlier, you wanted to make love to me gently."

“I did.” Wei Ying rolled to face him fully, so close their noses brushed. “And you *did* once claim I kept you up our whole wedding night. Is Lan Zhan trying to make that true?”

Wei Ying was teasing him again, and Lan Wangji never wanted him to stop.

Lan Wangji threw a leg over Wei Ying’s hips, and took his cock in hand, pausing just shy of drawing him closer.

Wei Ying raised a brow and, frustratingly, refused to make the final move to join them together himself. “What are you waiting for, Lan Zhan? I want to be inside you.”

That was all the encouragement he needed. Lan Wangji nudged his husband’s ass with his foot, encouraging him to thrust, and as they began to move together, he locked his teeth around Wei Ying’s shoulder. A single point of grounding, as he let pleasure sweep him away once more.

Lan Wangji woke to a loud banging sound. He had leaped off out of bed and grabbed Bichen before he realized it was merely knocking. Wei Ying sent Chenqing back to the void in a puff of black smoke.

What could possibly be worth forcing him to abandon his comfortable position on his husband’s chest the morning after his wedding? He pulled on his inner robe, and opened the door.

The sun of a bright mid-autumn day assaulted his eyes, likely one of the last before winter’s first freeze, forcing him to squint. The sun was high in the sky, midday at his best guess. Lan Wangji had never slept so late before. Their visitor stepped into the shade, and Lan Wangji blinked in surprise.

“Jin Zixuan?”

“Oh, Peacock, I forgot you were here.” Wei Ying leaned into Lan Wangji’s side, the heat of him warding off the chill of the outdoors, and added, “I swear I thought he was here.”

Jin Zixuan pulled the fur cloak around himself and scowled. “I attended your wedding last night.”

“And I was hardly looking at the *audience*. When you marry Jiang-guniang, see if you remember anything more than how beautiful she looks,” Wei Ying scolded. And to Lan Wangji, “He showed up yesterday, but Waipo insisted we could deal with it tomorrow — and then it entirely slipped my mind. Apparently, Jin Guangshan is planning to make his move soon. That’s all I know, so far.”

“Slipped your mind?”

“When you consumed my thoughts.”

The way Wei Ying looked at him was heart stopping, yet immensely silly. Lan Wangji wondered how he had never noticed it before he dove into Wei Ying's being and felt his feelings down to his soul. Maybe Wei Ying had kept the extent of his feelings from Lan Wangji's sight. Or maybe Lan Wangji had possessed no familiarity with what love looked like, when written on a beloved face.

It was an acceptable reason for the short delay, he decided, because Lan Wangji too was a fool in love. Lan Wangji pulled Wei Ying in by the loose collar of his inner robe, and kissed him thoroughly, forgetting they weren't alone from the moment Wei Ying's tongue slipped into his mouth.

Jin Zixuan's voice cut in. "Do you two ever stop?"

Lan Wangji had almost forgotten Jin Zixuan's presence already. He was looking away, his face redder than a tomato.

"Right. Let's get business out of the way so I can get back to being naked with my husband," Wei Ying said. "Lead the way."

Jin Zixuan made a face. "Put on some clothes first, you're not fit for company."

Wei Ying shrugged. "It's just my grandmothers and Wen Qing waiting right? They've seen worse."

But Lan Wangji stepped inside to grab an outer layer for himself, and cloaks for both of them, wedding gifts from Wei Ying's martial aunts and uncles. When Lan Wangji settled a cloak of black ox wool around Wei Ying's shoulders, positioning the red spider lily at the center of his back, Wei Ying pecked him gratefully on the cheek. Lan Wangji nearly dragged him back inside. Surely five-hundred-year-old immortals and a genius doctor could make a plan without him.

But he pulled his own autumn weather cloak, of a matching design but with blue and white detailing along the edges, around himself, and followed Jin Zixuan to Lan Yi's rooms.

Baoshan Sanren met them on the porch of the house. She was seated on the step, several covered platters arranged beside her to shield them from the cold. "I'm sorry for interrupting your rest. We let you sleep in, considering the circumstances, but Jin Zixuan did bring worrying news."

"Is A-Ma...?" Wei Ying stared, anxious, at the closed door. Lan Wangji's heart clenched, remembering another closed door, one that never opened no matter how long he knelt.

"Niangzi just had one of her fits, I'm afraid. She's resting now, with Wen Qing watching over her. We'll talk out here." She gestured to the platters. "I had breakfast brought for you."

Baoshan Sanren did her best to sound confident, but Wei Ying's hand shook as he reached out blindly for Lan Wangji. Lan Wangji had to take the lead in settling Wei Ying next to her. Neither of them moved to uncover the food.

Jin Zixuan shifted from foot to foot, remaining standing.

“This young man tells me his father is planning to bring the power of the sects down upon you, and soon.”

Wei Ying shrugged. “He was always going to come after me eventually. But thanks to Lan Zhan, we’ve been able to win over the other three Great Sects. Mostly.”

“The minor sects will do as Fuqin says. He thinks you have the ability to overcome his illness. To — to —” Jin Zixuan swallowed, grasping for the courage to outright accuse his father. “To counteract the effects of the Yin Iron. So he’ll lay siege, and with the Yin Iron on *his* side...”

“Even I can’t hold off Xue Chonghai, three pieces of Yin Iron, and over a thousand cultivators all at once,” Wei Ying lamented.

Lan Wangji squeezed his hand. Open battle was not the only solution. He doubted it was Jin Guangshan’s preferred strategy, given his unwillingness to fight on the front lines. Lan Wangji had seen his brother and uncle offer Jin Guangshan a low hanging fruit in many a diplomatic conflict, and come out on top. Jin Guangshan was not a stupid man, but he *was* lazy and interested in preserving his own skin even above his hunger for power. “The sects will not lay siege if we invite them in.”

Wei Ying blinked. “Invite them in? Like for a party?”

Lan Wangji scowled. How dare his husband acknowledge that Lan Wangji was suggesting a party. Of course, Wei Ying smiled, and his displeasure vanished like it had never been. “The unveiling of the residence of Yiling Wei.”

“Show off Wen Ning’s work and accuse Jin Guangshan of theft and murder before he can accuse me?” Wei Ying tapped his chin. “I like the sound of that.”

“How long will your banishment of Xue Chonghai last?” Baoshan Sanren asked. “Can we prepare a banquet before it breaks?”

“No,” Wei Ying said slowly. “We should schedule it for right after the banishment breaks. What could be a better lure for Xue Chonghai than guests distracting us?”

“But we will also have guests distracting us,” Lan Wangji pointed out.

“A-Xian is right. We will not have a better opportunity,” Baoshan Sanren said. “I will keep watch over the Yin Iron. Xue Chonghai has never faced me in battle, and if he thinks I have spent the centuries stagnant on my mountain, he will find himself surprised.”

The conversation turned to logistics. It would be a two-day reception, where the sect leaders would be feasted, and their invitations would offer tours to see the truth behind Yiling. Lan Wangji doubted they would reach those tours before Jin Guangshan or Xue Chonghai made a move, but they should plan for all outcomes.

“Is there enough space for all the guests?” Jin Zixuan asked.

Lan Wangji considered, attempting to approximate the math in his head. “If we have our disciples bunk together, limit each sect leader to four companions, and have the companions room in pairs, I believe so.”

“What about other guests of rank?” Wei Ying asked. “I can’t imagine Jin Zixun would be happy to share.”

Jin Zixuan shivered, looking mildly ill at the suggestion. “I’m certainly not volunteering.”

“Shufu would also not be pleased.”

“We can host our Lan guests in the other rooms around our courtyard,” Wei Ying suggested. “They are family, after all. And while Lan Xichen isn’t my biggest fan, he’s too honorable to stab me in my sleep. A-Ning can allocate space best, I’ll have him draw up a plan.”

Perhaps he could also write to Xiongzhong, explain the limited housing, and suggest that he share quarters with Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao. Having the Nie sleep close could be beneficial, should an attack come in the night.

“It’s most important that we’re prepared for Xue Chonghai this time,” Wei Ying said. “We can’t leave any unprotected innocents. What does our supply of peach wood look like?”

It had been Lan Yi who thought ahead on the matter of anti-jiangshi protections, with peach wood as the priority, for the simultaneous utility of striking fear in the heart of a jiangshi, and stabbing one.

Lan Wangji had checked on the supply the day before yesterday. “Not enough blades to go around yet, but the carpenter is directing the construction workers in whittling simple ones. We’ve informed the townspeople to keep all their jujube seeds, and carry around their mirror if they have one. We’re stocking up on glutinous rice, too.”

“My husband is ten steps ahead of me.” Wei Ying kissed him on the cheek, and Lan Wangji could not help preening. “I’ll set the disciples to copying out an invitation. Some of them need the calligraphy practice. Jin Zixuan, can you make sure Jiang Cheng replies quickly?”

Despite the circumstances, Lan Wangji always loved watching his husband take charge. He was breathtaking when he relayed rapid fire orders with unshrinking confidence.

But then, Wei Ying was always breathtaking.

Jin Zixuan hesitated but nodded. “I’ll explain to Yanli-jie. Jiang Wanyin will drag his feet if it comes directly from me.”

“Aw, overprotective brothers-in-law.” Wei Ying shook his head in commiseration. “The bane of our existence.”

Lan Wangji took it back. His husband was a menace.

So he elbowed him in the side, and took great pleasure in Wei Ying’s indignant squawk.



Xiao Xingchen, Song Lan, and A-Qing departed with Baoshan Sanren's disciples that evening. Song Lan was too high risk to remain in the Burial Mounds, or to go out in the world where Xue Chonghai might find him and take control again. And so while Xiao Xingchen would not ordinarily have need of the mountain, he pressed his token to the tree with deep roots, and the portal opened.

"Oh," Xiao Xingchen said, nearly inaudible in his disbelief.

Baoshan Sanren patted him on the shoulder. "When you need the mountain, the mountain will never turn you away."

Xiao Xingchen sniffed, tears running down his face. He wiped them away with the back of his hand, and his cultivation partner set a comforting hand on his shoulder. "Thank you, Shifu."

"Go on, then, all of you. Rest up, Xingchen. The rest of you, make sure he does." Baoshan Sanren waved at her disciples to walk through the portal. Wei Ying's family — *his* family, now — filed through, one by one, until the portal closed behind the last of them.

Baoshan Sanren bid them good night, and left to return to her wife's side.

Wei Ying watched her go with a pained expression. "We'll make it in time, won't we? I know we're doing all we can, but..."

"We'll be ready." Lan Wangji assured him, punctuating his words with a kiss. "But right now, I want to spend the night with my husband."

"My husband is right, as usual. Lead the way." Wei Ying managed a shadow of a smile, and Lan Wangji resolved to hold him close with everything he had.

Tonight, and forever.

Chapter End Notes

[Twitter Promo](#)

# Chapter 25

## Chapter Summary

Lan Xichen learns more of the truth than he wanted to.

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** bondage in the very first scene, if you want to skip jump to "“Ooh, a gift for me?”, Lan Xichen gets a very brief glimpse of a nude drawing of his brother

references for the bondage: [body](#) and [limbs](#)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Wangji reclined naked on the bed, with his hands bound over his head. The blanket was pushed toward the wall, the sheets rumped with jasmine flowers scattered over them, their scent soothing as he drifted under his husband’s appreciative gaze.

Wei Ying was seated a short distance away, with a brush in hand and a slab of wood holding his paper balanced on one knee. Wei Ying had taken his time turning Lan Wangji into an elaborate piece of artwork, beginning with a framework of four horizontal bands of rope between the top of his chest and his waist, anchored with a line of simple knots down the back. He looped the ropes between Lan Wangji’s legs, framing each side of his pelvis.

With a new set of ropes attached in the back, Wei Ying had crossed them back around the front and formed looping spirals on the top band, before taking the tails down to the band across his nipples, and linking them together there. The second and third bands were connected with a criss-cross shape, and the third and fourth with the same looping spirals as the first, inverted.

The rest of the rope was woven through the bands along each of his sides, up over his shoulders, and used up in a flat cushion over his shoulder blades to prevent the knots along his spine from digging in too much, when Wei Ying lay him back. Starting from the rope around his thighs, Wei Ying created another set of bands around his thighs and calves, until he bound his ankles together at the end. Along his outer thighs, Wei Ying looped another rope in a pattern that separated the strands at the top of each band and brought them together at the next. After repeating the process with Lan Wangji’s arms, he checked his ties over to ensure there wasn’t too much pressure against the nerves.

Wei Ying left Lan Wangji there to sink down, down, down while he worked to preserve the image.

Lan Wangji was required to do nothing but lie still, his limbs pleasantly restricted, and stare at his husband. Scarcely a hardship. He had been anxious about something, before Wei Ying put his hands on him, but now he lacked the focus to remember why.

The only sounds were the swipe of the brush on paper, and Wei Ying's occasional hums. His own breathing, loud in his ears. Silence had never been more welcome than when it was shared with the right companion.

He was not aware of time passing, of how far the sun shifted across the sky between each time Wei Ying picked up the brush and set it down. Each time he rose, to check the mobility of Lan Wangji's hands and feet, and traced along the paths of nerves, adjusting a band or a knot here and there as he went. Lan Wangji confirmed the absence of numb or tingling patches with slight nods of his head, unable to find it in himself to speak.

"Let's get you out of that now," Wei Ying crooned, leaning over him to start picking apart the knot around his wrist.

Lan Wangji blinked up at him, voiceless. Wei Ying maneuvered him around like a doll as he set him free, Lan Wangji unresisting and content, savoring the rough slide of the rope against his skin before it was gone. When the last knot was undone, Wei Ying moved him to sit on the edge of the bed, and climbed behind him, letting Lan Wangji lean against his chest, warm even through two layers of clothes, as he slowly surfaced.

Wei Ying played with Lan Wangji's hands, stretching his fingers for him and massaging between the joints, his wrists, all the way up to his forearms, and back down. Lan Wangji watched his hands work for a short while even after he regained the ability to speak, bemused, and with a heart full of love.

"Wei Ying," he finally said, after this had gone on for some time with no sign of an end. "My hands are fine."

"We can never be too careful with your hands, Lan Zhan. You need these to play the guqin and I kept you at my mercy for a long time."

Lan Wangji twisted his hands around to catch Wei Ying's, and brought them to his lips. "Thank you for your diligence."

"Anything for my beautiful, talented husband." Wei Ying said it jokingly, but it was still thrilling to know he meant it. Lan Wangji hoped he would never grow used to the praise.

"But my hands are fine." Lan Wangji extracted himself from the warmth of his husband's arms and walked on unsteady legs across the room. "Tea? And I have a gift for you."

There was a pot of tea there already, kept warm at a perfect drinking temperature by talisman. Lan Wangji knelt at the table, though his legs felt like they had the consistency of porridge

from their immobilization, and quickly poured himself a cup to wet his dry throat. Perhaps Wei Ying's massage had done him good, for his hands were much steadier than his legs.

"Ooh, a gift for me? What's the occasion?"

A glance back at his husband showed Wei Ying still reclined on the bed, watching him with hooded eyes.

"That I have finished it." He swept a hand across it to summon his guqin.

"Oh. Oh! Oh? Did you write me a *song*?"

Lan Wangji nodded.

Wei Ying scrambled to his feet, and hurried to sit cross-legged on the floor across from Lan Wangji. "Lan Zhan, I'm — that's the most wonderful gift you could ever give me."

He sat in silence without Lan Wangji needing to prompt him, his head propped up with his elbow on his knee. Lan Wangji let stillness descend in full before he plucked the first chord, and his fingers danced through the notes and phrases like he had known them all his life. Writing this song had not been a choice, but spurred on by something greater than him, by the love that had existed between them long before either knew it was returned. Lurking always in his thoughts through the best and worst of their relationship, and all the little ordinary moments in between, lent meaning only because Lan Wangji shared them with Wei Ying.

When he looked up, there were tears streaming down Wei Ying's face.

"Lan Zhan, this is the most beautiful thing I've ever heard." His smile was wide, recognizing the nature of the song, though he asked, "What's it called?"

"Can you not guess?" Lan Wangji had not been one for teasing before he met Wei Ying, but as much as Wei Ying loved making him blush, Lan Wangji loved making him work for it, all the shameless things his husband would say given the slightest prompting. The strange tracts his mind would spring to and unveil without a moment's hesitation.

He was not disappointed.

"Ah, Lan Zhan, if you still think I have any hope of matching your skill with poetry, Waipo would love to show you the list of terrible names I came up with for my sword. You'll have to tell me, or I'll guess only puns."

"Do you promise to show me that list?" One thing that had not changed about their relationship was that Lan Wangji still hungered for every new detail of Wei Ying. Those details came more often now, with Wei Ying no longer watching his words to hold back a secret that could ruin them. Lan Wangji still stored them away, not to hoard as he had when they were few and far between, but to parcel out when Wei Ying needed comfort, or a deserved a treat, or to use as ammunition for occasional teasing.

"My Lan Zhan, resorting to bargaining?" Wei Ying was positively delighted, the crinkle at the corner of his eyes deepening, somehow not at odds with the tear tracks on his cheeks.

“Yes, of course I’ll show you. If you laugh in my face, I’ll still be glad I showed you.”

Lan Wangji could not use the last often, or Wei Ying would start to get used to it. And he lit up too brightly when pleasantly surprised for Lan Wangji to ever get tired of witnessing the view.

Wei Ying was so sweet and sincere in his response, so willing to give himself over to embarrassment at the hands of his grandmother without even the guarantee of the song’s name, that Lan Wangji could not resist telling him.

“Wangxian.”

“Ah?”

“The name of the song. Wangxian.”

“Wangxian,” Wei Ying said slowly, rolling the syllables over his tongue. The moment the name’s meaning dawned on him was obvious, for Wei Ying brightened to rival the rising sun. “Lan Zhan, really? I’m going to cry again.”

Wei Ying hadn’t stopped crying even while he joked, not really. But his voice was more choked and rough.

“It is meant to be played as a duet,” Lan Wangji said. “Guqin and dizi.”

Wei Ying’s jaw dropped, but then Chenqing was in in his hands, and he wiped at his face with his sleeve. “Can we?”

“How much time is there until our guests arrive?”

“It’s still only midday. And you know there’s nothing left for us to do.”

Lan Wangji had never hosted anything before; he doubted he would excel as his brother did. Worse, that he and Wei Ying could not check on Baoshan Sanren and the Yin Iron, secreted away in Wei Ying’s workshop, without raising suspicion. They had done what they could to protect the town and disciples with items to ward off a jiangshi, but they could not protect their guests the same way before they confronted Jin Guangshan.

Lan Yi was bedbound, and awake only a few hours of each day.

He and Wei Ying had built up each others’ worries over the past month, and those worries had only been magnified since Xue Chonghai’s banishment broke two nights earlier. But in the moment, he was still too relaxed to panic.

“Then of course we may play together.” Lan Wangji began the song again, and after only a few bars Wei Ying joined in.

His heart was exposed and on display in the air around them, but Wei Ying held it safe with a flute that had commanded armies of the dead, and answered in the same language.

They were just finishing the tea when a butterfly made of spiritual energy fluttered through the wall, and landed on Lan Wangji's finger, raised to accept it. The words it whispered in his mind made him drop his cup onto the table with a clatter, and the dregs spilled onto the table. "Xiongzhong has arrived. He has just reached the edge of town now. We should go meet him."

Wei Ying hurried to move the papers aside, including the newly dry painting he had made of Lan Wangji. "So early!"

"I suspect he wanted to surprise us." Though Xiongzhong had grown less pushy in his questions about Lan Wangji's relationship when he did not receive the answer he wished for in return — that Lan Wangji had left his husband and would be returning to the Cloud Recesses — Lan Wangji suspected he had not given up.

"To catch me in the act of doing terrible things to you? Actual terrible things, and not, you know," Wei Ying caught his wrist, and traced along the red, patterned indent left by the ropes with the forefinger of his other hand, making him shiver. "Our little games."

The marks would fade within a few hours. Unfortunate, that Xiongzhong was this early.

"Wei Ying," he scolded. Wei Ying was not allowed to make him *want* when his family had just arrived in town.

Still holding onto his hand, Wei Ying sobered. "I don't know how I can ever make a different impression on your brother. To him, I ravished you, stole you away — and I *did* do those things. He isn't wrong. Just misunderstanding how much you wanted me to."

"You cannot steal a person who wants to go with you. He will see in time." Lan Wangji was tired of repeating that to Xiongzhong, but he was certain his brother would understand eventually.

"I suppose that means I can't throw around resentment and glare at him with red eyes anymore," Wei Ying sighed mournfully. "

"Do not be anyone but yourself. I want Xiongzhong to know the man I love, and his eyes are, sometimes, red." He paused. "Please do not glare, however."

"I'll do my best, so long as he doesn't try to take you away from me without your permission." Wei Ying leaned in to kiss him sweetly on the lips, and rose to his feet.

"Wei Ying, don't forget this." Lan Wangji grabbed the pair of peach wood short swords propped up by the door, handed one to Wei Ying, and slipped the other up his own sleeve. The barrier had fallen, and there was no telling when Xue Chonghai would make his appearance.

They found the Lan delegation — Xiongzhong, Shufu, and three disciples — being accosted in the market square by townspeople who wished to convey just how wonderful a match Hanguang-jun was for their Laozu. One of the kids from the orphanage, though not now short of food in any way, snuck into the bakery, and ran off with an armful of sweets. Lan Wangji did not call attention to them — they would share it with friends, and the baker was currently absorbed in terrifying his uncle.

Spotting him, Shufu exclaimed, “Wangji!” with a hint of desperation.

The townspeople scattered, accompanied by the soft percussive sound of jujube seeds and uncooked glutinous rice shifting rhythmically in their pockets. From store fronts and stalls, they pretended to go back to their activities. But Lan Wangji spotted the old carpenter start carving into a radish at a farmer’s stall instead of returning to his own store, and the farmer was too fixated on peaking over her cart to notice.

“Shufu, Xiongzhong,” Lan Wangji greeted them with a nod of his head.

“Shufu, Lan-zongzhu, it is good to see you,” Wei Ying said with his usual brightness. Only this was not a side of Wei Ying that Xiongzhong had seen before, and he stared at Wei Ying like he had grown a second head. “How are you finding Yiling? A bit more colorful than in Gusu, but the people don’t bite. Including the undead.”

The existence of fierce corpses in Yiling was not a secret. It would be more suspicious to hide them away than to let people see they were not a danger, it had been decided. It would be more difficult for Xue Chonghai to seize control of them than with Song Lan, for he had not created them, and they would not be so difficult to subdue if he did.

Shufu was staring after the old carpenter, stroking his goatee. “Your fierce corpses are remarkably lifelike. How do you ward off the decay? And I didn’t think it possible, but are they *talking*?”

“Shufu, they are people.” Lan Wangji hissed.

Wei Ying laughed, clasping his hands behind his back as he turned back the way they had come. “Please don’t say that to their faces, but I would be happy to explain how I make them on the way to the Burial Mounds. It really is nothing like what you associate with demonic cultivation. For one, it hinges on their consent.”

“Consent,” Xiongzhong grumbled beneath his breath. “So he does understand the concept.”

Lan Wangji could not blame him for assuming Wei Ying was a hypocrite. Especially because in some respects Wei Ying had been. What he didn’t like was Xiongzhong’s failure to accept that Lan Wangji was hiding things from him for a reason.

“You really didn’t change the name?” Shufu was saying.

“I wanted to respect the history of this place, while creating something new,” Wei Ying explained. “Yiling was shaped by the Burial Mounds, and it wouldn’t be right to try to wipe away everything that happened here.”

Shufu nodded, brusquely approving. "I visited Yiling many years ago on a night hunt, and it was a very different place. You should be proud. Don't you think, Xichen?"

Xiongzhong startled, clearing his throat. "The town is lovely. Vivid. And I don't just mean the colors of the houses. The townspeople here are very outspoken, not intimidated by titles. I've never been anywhere like it."

Lan Wangji was not smug Xiongzhong could not find a single criticism.

"They did not pause for breath while praising Wangji." Xiongzhong added. "I could not get a word in edgewise."

"Yiling was left to its own devices for centuries without the sects' oversight," Wei Ying explained. "I'm as much the town's collective son as its lord. And everyone loves Lan Zhan. How could they not?"

Shufu made grumbling noises of consideration in his throat. "Wangji was not always well-liked in the Cloud Recesses. He was respected, of course, for his abilities but —"

"Shufu," Xiongzhong scolded. "Wangji is right here."

"Xiongzhong, it is true." Lan Wangji said quietly. While the elders had helped him up as a shining example, he had been perhaps overly strict in upholding the disciplines. That was not a combination that had lent itself well to making friends. He had thought himself content enough without, but now that he knew what he was missing, the difference was stark.

"I was merely expressing how pleased I am to see he is appreciated," Shufu said.

"I love your nephew very much, and so does everyone in Yiling and up at the Burial Mounds." Wei Ying swung his head back to flash a heart-stopping grin at him. "You raised a wonderful man. I couldn't be happier to call him my husband."

They passed from the market into an area of courtyard houses, each of which had rows of glutinous rice spread along the ground outside the walls.

Xiongzhong stopped to peer down at a line of the grains, frowning. "There is a lot of rice on the ground, for some reason?"

"Glutinous rice," Wei Ying explained. "We believe the source of the recent qi drainings is a Jiangshi."

"So the rumors that you are behind it are untrue?"

Wei Ying took the accusation like a glancing blow. "Lan-zongzhu is very blunt, but I think you already knew that. Or you would be here with an army to rescue your brother and not accepting my hospitality with only three disciples at your back."

"Both my brother and Nie-zongzhu have assured me you have nothing to do with it. I trust them, and now that I have seen Yiling, I trust my own eyes." Xiongzhong did not have to sound so grudging about it, but Lan Wangji took his words as a good sign. For the rest of the



walk, Xiongzhong hung back with Lan Wangji in companionable silence, while Shufu questioned Wei Ying on the methods of his cultivation.

When they reached the Burial Mounds, disciples were rushing back and forth in the courtyard, carrying place settings to and from the banquet hall. Xie Yijie and Xia Jiayi stood nearby, having the privilege as instructors of directing the traffic, rather than participating in it.

An Yulun raced by and bowed over her burden of table cloths while still at full tilt. She over corrected, and managed to turn a fall into a flip, landing lightly on one foot, and ran onward without dropping a single cloth.

Gao Luxiang, however, startled, and a cup fell off his loaded platter.

Lan Wangji lunged forward and caught the cup before it could shatter in the dirt. He placed it back on Gao Luxiang's platter, and without any admonishment from him, Gao Luxiang hurriedly promised to be more careful.

Lan Wangji started to back to the conversation, but Xiongzhong caught him by the arm, and pushed back his sleeve, revealing the fading rope burn, horror in his expression.

"Wangji, what is that? What is he doing to you?"

Ah. When he grabbed the cup, his sleeve must have fallen back. Shufu had not seen — he was entirely captivated by something Wei Ying was saying. That was good, at least.

"Xiongzhong, it's not what you think."

"What am I supposed to think?" Xiongzhong had never directed so much anger at Lan Wangji before. Only at Wei Ying, when accusing him of exposing Lan Wangji to evil. "He demanded to marry you, kept you away from your family, and now this, he's *hurting* you —"

"He isn't," Lan Wangji snapped.

Save, perhaps, when Xiongzhong was trying to persuade him not to marry Wei Ying, Lan Wangji had never snapped at his brother in his life.

"Wangji, if he told you this is normal..." Xiongzhong trailed off, his grip loosening enough for Lan Wangji to wrench his arm free.

This was humiliating. While Lan Wangji had once willingly, and publicly, informed his brother he had a sex life, he had never wanted to share the details. More so, because Xiongzhong, for all Lan Wangji had always assumed him to be more worldly than himself, assumed it was a sign of abuse.

Xiongzhong did not seem to realize an alternative was even possible.

But his brother was frightened for him, and now it was no longer so important to hide the truth from him. Xiongzhong's support would be beneficial now if Lan Wangji could persuade him. He only had to admit he had lied, and hope Xiongzhong could forgive them both.

“I will explain. Just please, not in front of Shufu. I *cannot* speak of this with him.”

Bad enough to have to explain his sex life to Xiongzhong. If Shufu learned he had done anything more than kiss his husband, Lan Wangji’s soul would simply flee his body.

“If he needs to know, I will not keep it from him.”

That was an acceptable compromise, because Lan Wangji was certain Xiongzhong would never wish to think of it again, once he explained. Xiongzhong assumed he would be learning something entirely different from the truth.

“We may speak in my rooms. One moment.” He stepped toward Wei Ying, and tugged on his sleeve. “Wei Ying?”

Wei Ying broke off mid-sentence, turning all his attention to Lan Wangji. A sign of an attentive husband, though Xiongzhong could not yet see it. “Huh? What is it, Lan Zhan?”

“Please show Shufu some of your inventions. Xiongzhong wishes to speak to me in private.”

Wei Ying searched his eyes, concerned, and Lan Wangji tried to convey it was nothing he could not handle.

He hoped.

Finally, Wei Ying nodded. “Of course. Have a good talk with your brother.”

As he led Xiongzhong away, Lan Wangji heard Shufu say, “Tell me, Wei Wuxian, what is your plan for grandchildren?”

Lan Wangji selected a nice, calming silver needle white tea from his collection and placed it in a teapot full of freshly boiled water. Though a staple of the Cloud Recesses, it was rarely touched in his household, because Wei Ying liked to spoil him with floral-scented green teas.

Under other circumstances, he would show off the varieties to Xiongzhong, flavors he had chosen because *he* enjoyed them, and not because the Cloud Recesses purchased a few select varieties for their medicinal properties. But the blood vessel in Xiongzhong’s forehead currently resembled Shufu’s when facing down Nie Huaisang as a guest disciple, and so Lan Wangji thought something less stimulating was appropriate.

He did not stop his sleeves from sliding up when he placed two fresh cups on the table, exposing the rope marks to Xiongzhong’s staring. He was not ashamed of what he shared with Wei Ying, and he would not act like it.

“Wangji, we can’t let this continue —”

“Calm your thoughts please, Xiongzhong,” Lan Wangji said. *He* was calm. He wanted to stuff his face beneath the covers and scream into the mattress. But he was calm. “And I will explain when you are ready to listen.”

“You’re right, of course. I should not speak rashly.”

Drawing in a deep breath, Xiongzhong looked around the room. He took in the neatly organized shelves full of Lan Wangji’s things, the handful of Wei Ying’s decorative knots that Lan Wangji had moved from the mountain to brighten up the space. They had already begun to proliferate, with Wei Ying’s current project, which he claimed would end up a pair of rabbits but at the moment was only a tangle of loops held down by pins. The jasmine flowers were still spread across rumpled sheets — they hadn’t bothered to tidy up before heading down to Yiling to meet Lan Wangji’s family.

“Is that a meditation space?” Xiongzhong asked, with a gesture at his meditation nook, partially blocked by a screen.

“Wei Ying had Wen Ning include it in the design for me. He is very considerate of my needs.”

“Doing one nice thing for you does not mean he treats you well.” This criticism was levelly spoken, at least, but if Xiongzhong thought he was no longer speaking rashly, he was mistaken.

Lan Wangji picked up the teapot, and poured Xiongzhong a cup, steady handed despite his irritation.

It was slightly under steeped.

Xiongzhong thinned his lips, but said nothing.

A short time later, when Lan Wangji poured his own cup, it was the perfect shade, and he could put this off no longer. “Are you willing to listen?”

Xiongzhong nodded.

“I have misled you.” He cradled his tea in his hands, letting the heat give him courage. “I let you believe Wei Ying demanded my hand in marriage. But I asked Wei Ying to marry me.”

Xiongzhong was silent for a long moment. “I don’t understand.”

“Wei Ying has been seeking to destroy the Yin Iron for years, for reasons that are his to share if he wishes. It is for this reason that he was there to rescue us from the Xuanwu of Slaughter’s cave, for there was a fifth piece stored in its shell — stored away for now. While we were recovering, Jin Zixuan suggested a marriage alliance, to give Wei Ying a credible reason for joining the Sunshot Campaign, where destroying the Yin Iron would not be sufficient.” He took a sip of tea to wet his throat, dry from so much talking. “I could not watch Wei Ying marry someone else, if he would have me.”

There was a sharp intake of breath, as Xiongzhong finally realized. “You love him.”

“With everything I am.” Lan Wangji could not help his shy smile. Loving Wei Ying had ruined his self-control, and he did not care.

Xiongzhong shook his head. “That doesn’t make sense. Why would you not have told me? Why would I not believe him after he saved you?”

“It was not your belief that concerned us, but Jin Guangshan’s.” Lan Wangji drained the last of his cup, and poured another. Xiongzhong had barely touched his, but Lan Wangji topped it up anyway. “He would never have believed Wei Ying wanted to destroy the Yin Iron without an ulterior motive he could understand.”

“Establishing a sect for himself and winning himself a marriage alliance with the most honorable sect. My genuine hatred helped your plan, didn’t it?” Xiongzhong tossed back his cup of tea like it was liquor, and he was preparing himself for the verbal version of a bar fight. “But that doesn’t explain those marks on your wrists.”

“Xiongzhong, must I?” He had hoped that would be enough.

“Unless you want me to march out there and demand answers from your husband at sword point.”

“Very well. One moment, please.” The hem of his robe nudged the papers on the table as he stood. Were any of the books suitably tame to explain to Xiongzhong without graphic detail? No, that one would not work. Having to explain bondage was bad enough, but spanking? A game continuing while the submissive partner begged for it to stop? What the collar Lan Wangji still wore meant? Xiongzhong would qi deviate on the spot if he learned the extent of his little brother’s tastes.

Xiongzhong made a choking sound behind him.

The papers had shifted to reveal Wei Ying’s painting of Lan Wangji from that morning. The immensely revealing painting of his younger brother covered only in the rope that bound him. Xiongzhong dropped the drawing on the table, staring blindly down at it, giving Lan Wangji the chance to quickly hide it away.

Perhaps Xiongzhong had not noticed the detail in which Wei Ying rendered his cock?

Silence reigned until it became audible, the pulsing of his heart measuring the passage of time.

“This is... something you enjoy?” Xiongzhong asked finally, his voice strangled and high pitched.

Lan Wangji nodded.

“And you’re safe? He doesn’t make you do anything you don’t want?”

“Never.” Wei Ying was better at setting limits and monitoring Lan Wangji’s safety during their games than he was, but Xiongzhong did not need to know that detail.

“Perhaps I should spare us both further questions, then.” Xiongzhong poured himself more tea, and looked down at it like he was contemplating asking for something stronger.

“Please.” Lan Wangji would have preferred that state of uninhibited bliss himself, but they both needed to be alert for the banquet.

Wei Ying was still entertaining Shufu when they emerged into the sunset. Lan Wangji walked right up to Wei Ying, wound his arms around his neck, and pulled him into a kiss.

“Lan Zha — mmm.” Wei Ying melted into him, hands going to Lan Wangji’s waist. He had kissed Wei Ying in public many times before, but never in front of his family. It felt like the most illicit thing they had ever done, and yet more real, and lasting.

Shufu coughed loudly, and he pulled back, but Wei Ying’s arms remained around him.

“That was a surprise.” Wei Ying reached up to touch the silver spider lily guan on his head. “You look stunning, as always. But you got ready without me.”

“We do not have time for distractions.” And Wei Ying would have been a distraction.

“You’re right, of course, I’ll go put on my costume.” He pecked Lan Wangji on the lips, and spun away in a whirlwind.

“You are very affectionate with him, Wangji.” Shufu said.

“I love him.” Lan Wangji’s face was very warm, but he did not regret his actions. He could never regret any kiss with Wei Ying, even the ones that were objectively ill-considered.

“I do not disapprove. He is a clever young man — if he is, indeed, young? — and while he may be unconventional, he clearly respects you.” Shufu smiled, for just the blink of an eye, and Lan Wangji was certain he had hallucinated it. “You look happy, Wangji. That’s all I ever wanted for you, and I feared it would not come to pass.”

“What Shufu means is he’s happy so long as you give him grandchildren.”

Xiongzhong seemed to have recovered well from his shock, for he was joking again.

At least until Shufu rounded on him. “If either of my nephews should be thinking of adopting or producing an heir, it is you, Xichen.”

“Shufu!” Xiongzhong’s eyes darted from side to side in panic, ready to sprint away.

“Wangji’s husband tells me they are merely waiting for the sect to be more established, and they are both excited for the day they will be ready.” Shufu shook a finger at Xiongzhong, and Lan Wangji had to raise a hand to cover his amusement. “You, on the other hand...”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji stood together at the gates to the Burial Mounds to welcome their guests, allies, enemies, and the yet undecided alike. Wen Qing joined them, doing an

excellent job of hiding her impatience to see Mianmian, so long as one did not notice the needle she kept sliding in and out of her sleeve.

The first to arrive were the Nie, but it seemed the cause of their punctuality was merely Nie Mingjue's speed of flight and not by intention.

"Dage tried to leave me behind, but I wouldn't have it." Nie Huaisang proudly declared. He was windswept, but not nearly so exhausted as someone with his low cultivation should have been if he had attempted to fly from Qinghe himself.

"You're a menace, Huaisang." Nie Mingjue growled, but fondly. "He jumped on my third-in-command's sword, and the man just can't say no to Huaisang."

"Don't poke fun at Zonghui when you spoil Huaisang rotten, Dage," Meng Yao teased, patting Nie Mingjue's enormous bicep.

"We found him equally difficult to deny on his last visit," Wei Ying said. "Welcome to the Burial Mounds, Nie Zongzhu, I hope you find your quarters acceptable."

Nie Mingjue shrugged. "So long as that's not where you've hidden the resentment, I'm sure they'll be fine."

Lan Wangji exchanged a nervous glance with Wei Ying, and three needles found their way into Wen Qing's hand, though she couldn't intend to use them.

"*Dageeee*, your sense of humor is terrible," Nie Huaisang whined.

At a gesture from Wei Ying, Gao Luxiang came forward to escort them to their quarters. Nie Mingjue promptly began to interrogate him on how such a "strapping young man" was finding life as a disciple of Yiling Wei. Poor, shy Gao Luxiang stuttered his responses, uncertain how to converse with such a respected cultivator. It had taken him longer than most to interact casually with Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Laozu.

The Jiang arrived next, precisely on the hour. Jin Zixuan made a sixth member of the party, having remained in Lotus Pier since he left the Burial Mounds. He looked almost like one of them, with his betrothed leaning on his arm.

"Jiang Cheng!" Wei Wuxian dropped all semblance of formality, striding forward to clap him on the shoulder. "I trust the repairs are going well if you could make it in person?"

Jiang Wanyin pulled a face. "As well as can be expected. But the Peacock convinced A-Jie the world might end if I didn't show, so here I am."

"Thank you, Jiang-guniang, for your assistance." Wei Ying bowed to Jiang Yanli, and she smiled.

"Of course, Zixuan made the stakes very clear. And I —" She broke off, looking over her shoulder as a distant rumbling grew into the sound of stomping footsteps and raised voices.

Jin Guangshan arrived with a far larger party than the invitations had permitted for a single sect, though only five were in the colors of Lanling Jin. He had come with the minor sects arrayed at his back, in a show of intimidation.

That was the only thing imposing about him, for Jin Guangshan himself looked as though he had aged decades with the turning of the seasons. Though Yiling was far enough south that it was chilly but above freezing at midwinter, he was bundled up in a heavy fur cloak, his hands hidden in his sleeves, with a fur cap upon his head. Cultivators were supposed to be good at regulating body temperature, but Jin Guangshan shivered beneath his layers.

The bags under his eyes belonged on a raccoon-dog, and his skin drooped from his skin without any substance to it, like it was simply falling off his skeleton while he was still alive.

Mianmian stood out from the four cultivators with Jin Guangshan because compared to the others, she was fresh as a spring daisy, the only one who looked entirely alive. There was Jin Zixun, and Su Minshan, both of whom looked like they hadn't slept in weeks. The fourth looked like he'd recently been sucked on by a mosquito the size of a horse, and stood at a distance from the others. Xue Chonghai in disguise, perhaps, if he did not care to be subtle, knowing they could not make their move until he did.

Wen Qing started to step forward at the sight of her lover, but Mianmian shook her head.

Lan Wangji did not like to stand in the way of love, but if all went well, they would have all the time in the world later.

"Son," Jin Guangshan croaked, his eyes falling on Jin Zixuan. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"I sent a letter." Jin Zixuan looked like he wanted to shove Jiang Yanli behind him, yet like her grip on his arm was the only thing holding him upright. He continued to stand at her side, the simplest of rebellions, but an irrefutable one.

"I must have missed it." Jin Guangshan's attempt at a jovial smile was skeletal.

"Thank you all for coming." Wei Ying projected his voice over the crowd. "Jin-zongzhu, you don't look entirely well, if you don't mind my saying. Let's get you inside where it's warm. Since everyone's here, you can set your things down in your guest rooms, and go right to the banquet hall. There will be hot tea and soup ready and waiting for you. An Yulun, could you go let the Lan and Nie know the banquet will begin soon, please?"

At that, the cultivators assembled behind Jin Guangshan glanced at each other, and whispered amongst themselves, the mutterings detached from any singular person.

*Didn't Jin-zongzhu say the Yiling Laozu was responsible for his illness?*

*But why would Wei-zongzhu bring it up?*

*I always liked the Yiling Laozu during the Sunshot Campaign.*

*Our zongzhu isn't that polite when he asks me to do things.*

*Hanguang-jun doesn't look like he's been kept in a dungeon in chains.*

“Don't get too mad at them for slandering me, Lan Zhan. The confusion is good,” Wei Ying whispered.

Wei Ying was correct. These were the sect leaders' most loyal disciples, yet they — and perhaps some of the minor sect leaders themselves — doubted Jin Guangshan's claims. That did not mean Lan Wangji had to like their gossiping about his husband. He caught Wei Ying's hand, and snuck a quick kiss to his cheek, as they turned to lead the way within.

“They just don't stop acting like newlyweds,” Wen Qing grumbled, louder than she would normally, for the benefit of the crowd.

The cultivators from minor sects went silent and then their whispering renewed with greater fervor. The tale of Hanguang-jun and the Yiling Laozu could be imagined in a thousand variations, a darkly romantic fairy story, and it did not matter that none would ever come close to the truth.

## Chapter End Notes

[Promo Tweet](#)



# Chapter 26

## Chapter Summary

“Surely you can’t be having sex every time a crime is committed!”

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** minor character death, smut features: playful and light yllz roleplay, intercrural, and goes from "It gave Lan Wangji the opportunity" to "Out in the night"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The first banquet hosted at the Burial Mounds by Yiling Wei began innocuously, considering the ulterior motives of guests and hosts alike.

Lan Wangji sat by Wei Ying at the head of the hall, the thrones positioned close enough together for Wei Ying to place a proprietary hand on Lan Wangji’s knee. With the tables holding their dishes positioned to the side of the thrones, everyone could see it. Unbothered, Lan Wangji stared over their heads, watching for suspicious movements.

Since the unveiling of the thrones, painted scrolls had been hung up on the wall, depicting the creation of the Burial Mounds by Xue Chonghai, the centuries of horror and deprivation faced by the town, their cleansing by the Yiling Laozu, and the flourishing town. Lan Wangji himself was present in the final painting, as a hero from afar who won the Laozu’s heart. It was a fairy tale, a simplified version of the story he could already imagine being passed down to future generations, but Lan Wangji was fond of it.

He and Wei Ying were equals in that story, as they should be, and more than one among the cultivators took note, as they perused the decor before taking their seats. The whispers that carried to the throne were mostly favorable, impressed by all Yiling Wei had built in such a short time.

Lan Wangji was not a spy, and he could not interpret the discreet yet dramatic hand gestures Nie Huaisang was making in his direction. They were only a distraction. One that quickly came to an end when Nie Mingjue snapped at him to sit still. But *something* was already out of place among the guests. He could tell that much.

When the last guest had taken their seat, Wei Ying began his welcome speech, prepared by Lan Yi in her scattered waking hours, as the only one among them who had experience

hosting conferences, albeit far smaller ones in her day. His voice projected through the room, the thrones perfectly placed to take advantage of the natural acoustics.

“Thank you to everyone for coming. I know it must seem strange to walk into the Burial Mounds when they have been a place of untold horrors for so many centuries.”

He paused, and the guests obliged with hesitant laughter.

“It has been a long and difficult journey to cleanse the land, and that journey is still ongoing in its restoration. That is why the symbol of Yiling Wei is one of rebirth. Here, life grows from the memory of untold horrors. I am proud of what we have accomplished here, and I wish to share a taste of those humble accomplishments with you.” Wei Ying gestured at the dishes laid out before each sect. “Please, enjoy the meal our cooks have prepared for you, rest well from your journey, and tomorrow we have much more to show you.”

With a lopsided smile, Wei Ying added. “All the ingredients that make up tonight’s dishes come from the farms around Yiling, not the Burial Mounds, if anyone was concerned.”

This time, the laughter was more genuine.

As everyone began to dig in, Wei Ying placed a particularly juicy kai lan on Lan Wangji’s rice. There was a dish of lamb in a dangerously red sauce on his own table, specifically placed there so he could feed it to Wei Ying and they would look disgustingly domestic. Lan Wangji piled several pieces onto Wei Ying’s dish, and got a kiss on the cheek in return.

The first to approach them was Sect Leader Yao, a bottle of wine in hand as a gift for Wei Ying. It seemed he thought they were friendly after the Crowd Hunt, and wished to ingratiate himself with Wei Ying in case he was the mastermind behind the theft of the Yin Iron, the uptick in qi drainings and fierce corpses, and Jin Guangshan’s illness. Sect Leader Yao did not express this outright, but he did emphasize his sect’s recent decimation and relative powerlessness repeatedly.

Absently taking a bite, Lan Wangji returned his attention to the guests, and let his gaze drift to the Jin. Luo Qingyang caught his eye, and gestured at an empty table at the back of the Jins’ allotment of seats. An empty seat, though they had prepared one less place seating than they had guests of the Jin sect.

Ah, he realized. Nie Huaisang had been gesturing for Lan Wangji to look at her.

Jin Guangshan was hacking up a lung into a bowl held up for him by Su Minshan, and the unknown disciple picked at his food. Jin Zixuan wasn’t there, but a quick glance over at the Jiang sect revealed he has squeezed himself in among them, and Jiang Wanyin was fuming about it.

“Jin Zixun isn’t here,” he whispered to Wei Ying when Sect Leader Yao returned to his seat with a jar of wine from Wei Ying’s table to placate him. “The annoying cousin,” he clarified in case Wei Ying had forgotten the name again.

Wei Ying squeezed his knee in a comforting gesture. “Probably sneaking around, trying to find the Yin Iron.”

“Already?” Lan Wangji had expected anything momentous to commence after the banquet when there were more people milling about, or during the night. Did Xue Chonghai and Jin Guangshan really think they would not have disciples watching the grounds, armed with both swords of peach wood and steel?

“Jin Guangshan is desperate, and I doubt he fully trusts Xue Chonghai.” Wei Ying plucked a piece of tofu off Lan Wangji’s rice with his chopsticks and fed it to him, to disguise their conspiring.

Jin Guangshan glowered up at them from below, but before he could speak up, he burst into another coughing fit, choking up phlegm into his bowl.

Sect Leader Ouyang cleared his throat loudly, and looked surprised when chopsticks still as attention centered on him.

“Ah, Wei-zongzhu, just, that is to say...” Sect Leader Ouyang glanced between the ailing Chief Cultivator, and the Yiling Laozu on his throne of wooden bones, and swallowed so heavily Lan Wangji could see his throat bob from halfway across the room. “You have always been charming, but I am deeply impressed by everything I have seen so far. I’m surprised I haven’t seen a single ghost.”

“Hanguang-jun is a good influence on me.” Wei Ying smiled at him, the picture of a lovesick young husband, but that was not the reason a sudden sharp pang of arousal shot through his groin. “But not *that* good of an influence. There are a few ghosts around town if you would like to meet them.”

Lan Wangji stared down at his lap in confusion. Wei Ying was always attractive, but why this sudden need now? Perhaps it had been too long since he last heard his husband drawl his title. Or perhaps it had simply been so long since Wei Ying used his title outside of a sexual context that he responded to it automatically now.

Inconvenient.

But somehow not surprising.

His burgeoning erection wasn’t visible through the layers, thankfully, but it was insistent.

He shifted, trying to ignore it.

The sect leaders seemed to be responding as well as could be expected to Wei Ying so far, after how thoroughly he had terrified them during the Sunshot Campaign. “Congratulations on the successful partnership,” Jin Guangshan said, having finally gotten his lungs under control. “I don’t think any of us expected your marriage to Lan er-gongzi to be so fruitful, considering it prevented a love match. Of course, matters of government supersede those of the heart.”

Jiang Wanyin snorted.

“Do you have something to add, Jiang-zongzhu?”

“I witnessed some of Hanguang-jun and Wei-zongzhu’s attempts at courting. It was unmistakable.”

“So Hanguang-jun *isn’t* in love with Luo Qingyang?” Sect Leader Ouyang’s wife gasped.

Though he did not owe them an answer, Lan Wangji could not stay silent at the resurgence of *that* nonsense. “That is an unfounded rumor spread by children.”

“Hanguang-jun was entirely free to marry me, and I am the most fortunate man in the world that he was willing. I have been forbearing as I wish for my sect to be accepted among yours, but I will not tolerate anymore gossip about my husband under my own roof.” Wei Ying’s eyes flashed red, and a single tendril of resentment reached out to pluck a wine jar from his table. It tilted to feed him a swallow, and placed itself in his upraised hand. Only a single droplet trailed down his throat, tempting Lan Wangji to lick it off. “Is that understood?”

Lan Wangji wondered how they would react if he simply climbed into his husband’s lap. And caught himself — that was the opposite of ignoring his... problem, and would undo all his hard work with Xiongzhong earlier by resurrecting his conviction that Wei Ying was controlling him with demonic cultivation.

The heat of Wei Ying’s hand burned through the layers of robes.

There was silence for a time, no one daring to be the one to draw the Yiling Laozu’s attention. This was not ideal for their plan, and Wen Qing had her head in her hands. But Wei Ying’s defense of him was far too attractive for Lan Wangji to care.

When Wei Ying showed no signs of tearing them all to shreds, and Nie Mingjue, the most daring of sect leaders, and Jiang Wanyin, who knew Wei Ying’s personality well enough not to believe his threats, resumed their meals and conversing with their companions, the rest of the guests slowly followed suit.

Sect Leader and Madame Ouyang even approached the thrones to give their personal, mincing apologies. Lan Wangji did not bother to acknowledge them.

But Wei Ying said, “Hanguang-jun does seem like the lead of a romantic story, doesn’t he? I recall you are fond of those, Madame Ouyang, but I’m afraid you had his opposite number all wrong. Don’t make the same mistake again, and I’m sure the relationship between our sects won’t suffer for it. Isn’t that right, Hanguang-jun?”

He groaned, low in his throat.

Instantly, all of Wei Ying’s attention shifted to him, and it felt like the other nine suns had returned to the sky, and focused all their intensity on him alone. “Lan Zhan?”

“Call me that again.” He breathed out the words, his self-control shredding as all his blood rushed to his dick, his heartbeat echoing in his ears.

“Call you what, Hanguang-jun?” Wei Ying squeezed his knee, and Lan Wangji’s eyelids fluttered. “Ah, okay. I no longer care whether it’s socially appropriate to leave our own banquet, you?”

Lan Wangji shook his head, and leaned across the small space between their thrones to kiss his husband on the lips, sweetly, but with promise.

The Ouyangs’ jaws had dropped, and they backed away willingly, gleeful to share the best gossip of their lives with their good friend Sect Leader Yao.

Wei Ying stood, pulling Lan Wangji up with him, and projected his voice across the room. “Thank you all again for coming, I hope you have enjoyed the food. Please continue to eat and drink your fill. Rest well, and we look forward to the activities planned for tomorrow.”

Some number of other cultivators, about a third of their guests, rose to take their leave for the night. Jiang Yanli and Jin Zixuan got to their feet at the same time, leading Jiang Wanyin to throw a fit that was quite minor for him, but still attention catching.

It gave Lan Wangji the opportunity to pull his husband through the banquet hall’s entrance to the secret tunnels.

Wei Ying spun him around, pinning him to the wall, and kissed him like he was the only thing that mattered. The peaks of the rock dug into Lan Wangji’s back. Wei Ying inserted a thigh between his, relieving some of the pressure, and Lan Wangji sighed into his mouth, blissfully fulfilled.

“Xue Chonghai may make his move tonight,” Wei Ying murmured against his lips, his voice harsh from restraint.

Lan Wangji licked his lips, his throat struggling to work. “In all likelihood.”

“We can’t get distracted.”

This was reckless, immensely so. Every rule stored in his memory screamed for him to be good, to resist temptation. But that only added to the thrill. The only one he wanted to be good for was Wei Ying. “Are you saying no?”

Wei Ying threw a hand out, and smoke billowed from it, blocking off the tunnel in either direction, as well as the exit to the banquet hall. A single torch on the opposite wall was all that lit the space around them, and Wei Ying’s red eyes stood out against the shadows transforming his beloved face into a sinister thing of nightmares. That should not have made Lan Wangji want him more, should not have sparked an involuntary roll of his hips, but there had always been something a little bit wrong with him.

“I’m saying I can’t play with you for anywhere near as long as I want.” He grabbed Lan Wangji through his pants, and squeezed. “We’ll both have to come quickly. But something tells me that won’t be a problem for you, Hanguang-jun.”

He shuddered. No, it certainly would not be a problem. “I am ready to serve you, Laozu.”

Wei Ying removed his hand from between them to lift his chin, quickly figuring out their game. “Oh, I see. My sweet, virtuous Hanguang-jun has gotten tired of pretending he doesn’t want me, and is finally ready to give in.” Letting him go entirely, Wei Ying stepped back into the shadows so only his glowing eyes were visible. “Turn around, brace your hands against the wall.”

Wei Ying fished through Lan Wangji’s robes for the little jar he kept on himself, his hands rough and demanding. When he found it, he gathered up Lan Wangji’s robes, and shoved them to one side. The pants, he shoved down, and they fell to Lan Wangji’s ankles. But he did not sheath himself inside Lan Wangji, as he had expected.

The lubricant was still cool when it touched his inner thighs, and he jumped. Yelped, and though no one could hear him but Wei Ying through thick stone and the shielding of resentment, he imagined someone might hear a faint cry, and think it the echo of a long-since liberated ghost. Or guess correctly, and know the Yiling Laozu’s favorite hobby was pleasing his husband, and not any of those ridiculous rumors.

Wei Ying massaged away the chill, and leaned in to hook his chin over Lan Wangji’s shoulder. Wei Ying had freed his own cock of its confines, and it pressed against the cleft of Lan Wangji’s cheeks, taunting him with what he would not get today. “Press your thighs tight, Hanguang-jun. You don’t have to be afraid of your desires, no matter what the rules say. You’re a married man now, and you can ask for whatever you please.”

“I thought this was supposed to be quick.” Lan Wangji grumbled, and did not whine.

Wei Ying pinched him, just below the curve of his ass. “We could stop now, if you’re so worried.”

“Fuck my thighs please, Laozu, make me come,” he said, a little flat and impatient, adding the last part in case Wei Ying got any funny ideas about edging him, tonight of all nights.

It made Wei Ying laugh, and thankfully, finally, he pressed between clenched thighs. Wei Ying gripped his hips for leverage and bore into him hard and fast, and the slapping of skin against skin echoed off the walls, drowning out the faint sounds of feasting. The slide of Wei Ying between his sensitive thighs, against the underside of his balls made his joints weaken, and it was not long before Lan Wangji’s arms began to shake with the effort of keeping them both steady.

“Touch yourself, Hanguang-jun, and let me hear you.” Wei Ying panted heavily into his ear, breath hot against the nape of his neck. Lan Wangji let one of his elbows give out, and, bracing himself on one forearm, brought a hand to his cock. The shear relief of his own touch made him cry out, losing track of everything but the sensation. It didn’t matter how much the rock dug into his skin, he just need that little bit *more*.

“These sounds are mine alone, no one else gets to hear you like this. No one else gets to know how incredible you are, how easily you fall apart for me.” That was a common refrain in their games, but Lan Wangji never grew tired of hearing it.

Wei Ying fell into primal noises after that, just out of sync with his own, and as he faltered in his thrusting, he dug his teeth into Lan Wangji's shoulder. Lan Wangji came hard as Wei Ying's spend coated his hand, dripped between his thighs. Mixed together with Lan Wangji's on the wall, marking this place as theirs.

With the weight of Wei Ying heavy against his back, Lan Wangji let his forehead fall forward into the wall. He felt warm and sheltered in this little sanctuary away from their responsibilities and the trials to come.

They could stay there, cocooned together, for a short while longer.

Out in the night, someone screamed.

Su Minshan stood over the body, pointing and blubbing.

This was what they'd been waiting for, but the victim was hardly who they'd expected. Nor was the method of murder.

For Jin Zixun stared, blank-eyed up at the ceiling of his guest room, a knife embedded in his belly. Blood seeped into the floor around him in a sticky pool.

Lan Wangji pitied whoever would find themselves responsible for cleaning up the mess.

It had not been difficult to follow the source of the screaming. Cultivators, as a group, always ran toward imminent chaos. These were instincts even the most motivated by gold could not deny. By the time Lan Wangji arrived with Wei Ying, nearly all of their guests were crowded around the guest rooms assigned to the Jins.

They craned their necks, trying to see inside, but parted with nervous chuckling the moment they realized whose way they were blocking. Lan Wangji kept a tight grip on Wei Ying's hand as they made their way through, but it was still far too many people for his taste. Yet he forgot the press of the crowd when he laid eyes on the body.

The leaders of the Great Sects were gathered around the doorway, their expressions varying from apathy (Nie Mingjue) to concern (Xiongzhong) to anger (Jin Guangshan). Within the room, Nie Huaisang was collapsed in a dramatic faint near the doorway, with his head in Meng Yao's lap. Su Minshan continued to blubber, though no one was paying attention to him. Wen Ning stood nearby, behind a shorter guest, wringing his hands together, and Wei Wuxian dragged him out of the crowd to stand at his side.

"There he is!" Jin Guangshan accused, his voice too choked by phlegm for true volume. "The Yiling Laozu killed my nephew!"

"Let's all calm down and address this in an orderly fashion," Xiongzhong said, with a reassuring amount of calm. He *did* trust Lan Wangji, at least far enough to give Wei Ying the benefit of the doubt. That it was not Xiongzhong making the rash accusation against Wei

Ying was deeply reassuring. "I hope you're not accusing my brother's husband without due evidence."

"What evidence do I need? My nephew is dead in his home!" Jin Guangshan clutched his cloak closely around himself as he shouted, red cheeked.

Wei Ying stepped from the crowd, and Lan Wangji did not think it was his own bias that put Jin Guangshan firmly in his shadow, but the innate difference in their stature. "You forget, Jin-zongzhu, that this crime, as well as the theft of the Yin Iron, have been strangely timed to incriminate and inconvenience me."

"Then where were you when my nephew lay dying?" Jin Guangshan demanded.

"We were, Um." Wei Ying glanced nervously at the Lan group.

"Engaging in marital activities." Lan Wangji finished for him.

Jin Guangshan sputtered, and gave a racking cough into his sleeve before he could reply. "Surely you can't be having sex every time a crime is committed!"

Wen Ning cleared his throat, and shrank in on himself when he attracted the glares of the furious sect leaders. "Jin-zongzhu would not be aware of this, but everyone in Yiling Wei knows that if you can't easily find both Wei-zongzhu and Hanguang-jun, they are having sex."

Wei Ying pinched the bridge of his nose. "That's an exaggeration. But yes, in this instance, we were."

"Wangji..." Lan Xichen trailed off in dismay, recognizing the dishevelment of their robes.

At least Shufu was somewhere in the crowd, and Lan Wangji could hope he hadn't heard.

"I think it's safe to say Wei-zongzhu's location at the time of the murder has been verified," Nie Mingjue said, and as he bickered with Jin Guangshan, Wen Ning leaned in between them.

"Wei-zongzhu, no one has approached the tunnels yet from the main entrance." Wen Ning reported in a low whisper, just loud enough to be heard. "The banquet hall is harder to tell, but Yulun only saw you and Hanguang-jun go in."

"And the cave?" Xue Chonghai would have expected them to move the Yin Iron, could sense the pieces better than Wei Ying, or even Lan Yi. But it was worth keeping an eye out for suspicious activity there anyway.

"Some guests wandered in to see the blood pool, but no one stormed out." Wen Ning shrugged under Wei Ying's gaze, enough to verify this was "I did see the victim there, but that was before the banquet."

"Which Jin Zixun didn't attend." Wei Ying raised his voice to address the others. "Everyone, my disciple says he saw Jin Zixun shortly before his death. A-Ning, what was he doing? Was



he with anyone?”

A cultivator in the pink of Laoling Qin interrupted with a crazed laugh. “You want a Wen to testify? You must be joking.”

“Wen Ning has more than proven himself to me, and I will not have his word questioned.”

Wei Ying glared the Qin disciple down, but without an accompanying reminder of his power, someone at the back of the crowd was not afraid to say, derisively, “Since when has your word meant anything?”

“Wei-zongzhu, you may not have killed my nephew personally, but how can we trust anything you say? You appeared one day from nowhere claiming to have rescued my son and Hanguang-jun, but they were missing for three months before that day. We started a war over it, and you demanded Hanguang-jun’s hand in marriage — which I admit seems to be based on more willing consent than we originally believed — a place among us, and a weapon of catastrophic power in return. Only the weapon went missing, and my son has been uncharacteristically rebellious since his return.”

Jin Zixuan was not there, come to think of it. Lan Wangji rose onto his tiptoes to peer into the crowd, and could not find several familiar faces. Wen Qing, Luo Qingyang, and the Jiang siblings were absent as well.

“Your son’s decisions are his own. And as for the Yin Iron, you know very well I wished to destroy it. I have no need for a weapon that destroys its wielder when I have built my own power through safer means.”

“That does not answer why we should trust your word,” Jin Guangshan hissed.

Wei Ying produced Chenqing, and twirled it through his fingers, beginning to pace back and forth before the door. “I can tell you without trying to call upon his spirit that your nephew is no longer here with us. I can tell you that your authority will only last as long as you can keep the sects beholden to you.” Only then did he deign to turn blood-red eyes on the enemy. “How long will they remain so when you fling around accusations you cannot prove? When you are deteriorating before their very eyes from a cause of your own making?”

“Stop pretending. I know you’re hiding the cure from me, you little —” Jin Guangshan cut off in a wet, choking sound that, sadly, lasted only a short moment.

Wei Ying flipped Chenqing so its end pointed to Jin Guangshan. Swathed in so many furs, he seemed decrepit, and yet, like a petulant child.

“The cure for what, Jin-zongzhu? How would I know what you’re suffering from? I’m not a doctor, but perhaps my first disciple Wen Qing could examine you? She has worked miracles where other doctors failed, as you already know.”

It was a reminder to all that Wen Qing had saved many of their disciples from their fate of becoming infectious puppets, and that Jin Guangshan had scorned that gift. And yet, he had

been so quick to accuse her sect leader of causing his illness rather than ask for help, and no evidence supporting his claims had yet materialized.

Nie Mingjue raised his voice above the clamor of the crowd. "Let the boy speak."

Wen Ning cleared his throat. Though he had a low voice, it came out squeaky with nerves, but he managed to speak steadily. "Jin Zixun was with the disciples of his clan, and the Nie disciples were already there, to see the blood pool. He said something I will not repeat about Meng-gongzi's mother, then threw a large rock into the pool, and the water splashed Meng-gongzi's robes. Luo-guniang told Jin Zixun to apologize, and he snapped that being Jin-gongzi's favorite did not make her important, and made a pass at her in the same sentence. She slapped him, implied he's a bully to make himself feel important, and because he couldn't satisfy a lover, and left with Meng-gongzi."

From within the room, Su Minshan yelled. It seemed he had finally stopped his blubbling act, only to whirl around and point at Meng Yao. "You! You must have killed him. This is why he turned down the chance to be acknowledged by Jin-zongzhu, he wanted revenge instead."

Meng Yao rolled his eyes. "And so I killed this annoyance first, and left his body for anyone to find, at the risk of getting caught before I could get to Jin-zongzhu? When it would be incredibly easy to arrange Jin Zixun's death on a night hunt? Or as a tryst gone wrong?"

"See, he admits to planning Jin Zixun's death!" Su Minshan's arm quivered as he pointed even harder.

"I admit to thinking about it, on occasion." Meng Yao said dismissively, the picture of calm in the face of his accuser's dramatics. "That I'm willing to admit it should tell you that I'm not the one who did this. It's more suspicious that you would point a finger at me, Su-gongzi, when you're the one who found the body."

"Unless you're trying to lead us off track!"

Xiongzhong groaned, rubbing his forehead, and stepped into the room, pulling Meng Yao behind him. "All right, that's enough. Meng Yao has been with me, in the guest rooms provided to the Lan since we left the banquet. He was showing me his progress on the guqin since our last lesson."

Nie Huaisang beckoned to Meng Yao from his position on the ground and when Meng Yao slipped out of Xiongzhong's grip to bend toward him, whispered something in his ear.

Meng Yao nodded thoughtfully, and straightened to address the others as Nie Huaisang faked falling back in a fresh faint. "This looks like a crime of passion, or circumstance to me. See how there are drag marks leading in from the door, that Jin-zongzhu is standing on now? He was killed elsewhere and dragged in to hide the body."

"But any cultivator could carry the body, and make it look like they were helping a drunk friend," Wei Ying pointed out.

“Are you saying *my nephew* was killed by some mediocre servant?” Jin Guangshan demanded in an outrage.

Men Yao shook his head. “Not every cultivator could carry a full-grown man. Huaisang couldn’t. Someone injured couldn’t. I would not have been able to before the war and my recent training. I daresay a few among the disciples here couldn’t, especially if any are survivors of the infectious puppets.”

“Several of mine are not yet strong enough, it’s true.” Wei Ying said. “But none of those candidates have a motive to kill Jin Zixun. Except maybe Nie Huaisang.”

“Hey!” Nie Huaisang peeled himself slightly off the floor to be indignant. “I couldn’t murder a fly if I wanted to!”

“Oh, dear. So many people here already.” Jiang Yanli said, from the back of the crowd, her hands flying up to cover her mouth. Her face drained of blood, and Jin Zixuan and Wen Qing supported her at either elbow. Jiang Cheng and Luo Qingyang had arrived with them, and for reasons Lan Wangji could not comprehend, stood before Jiang Yanli with their swords at the ready.

“Please shield your eyes, Jiang-guniang,” Sect Leader Yao said, patronizing, . “I’m afraid there’s been a murder.”

“I know.” Jiang Yanli did not blink as she stared through the doorway at the body bathed in candlelight. “I stabbed him.”


## Chapter End Notes

Just five chapters left! I'll be posting them more quickly until the end 💖

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 27

## Chapter Summary

Jiang Yanli explains the , no one really likes Jin Guangshan, and Su She isn't a very good actor.

## Chapter Notes

I usually try to avoid ao3 dead posting hours but I meant to update yesterday, and then this morning and my parents arrived to visit me today 🤔😁 and I really want the rest of this fic posted so --

**CW:** Minor character death again (and again not sad), and I'm going to clarify in advance that the reason jyl stabbed jin zixun has nothing to do with anything sexual

The crowd split in two, stepping back even more quickly than they had for Wei Wuxian, to let Jiang Yanli and her companions pass. Jiang Cheng waved his sword in the face of anyone who even looked like they were considering moving closer, or speaking out against his sister.

By the time they reached the door where Wei Wuxian stood with his husband and the leaders of the great sects, Jin Guangshan was still too shocked to react with more than vapid blinking and a shocked, “*You* murdered my nephew, Jiang-guniang?”

Jiang Yanli held her head high, and kept her gaze forward as they approached, like a strange parody of a bride. “I did not say that I murdered him.”

“Jiang-guniang. You say you didn’t murder Jin Zixun, but you admitted to stabbing him,” Wei Wuxian said, flipping Chenqing over in his hand. There were any number of things Jiang Yanli could mean. That she had stabbed him in self-defence was undoubtedly true. But if that were all surely she would simply say so. “What do you mean?”

“I stabbed Jin Zixun, but I’m rather certain he was already dead.” Jiang Yanli’s words rang out of the silent crowd, startling even herself with their volume.

“But he wasn’t a fierce corpse! Any fool can see that! Look, no black veins!” The Jin disciple who had found the body, Su She, blurted out from within the room.

It was true. There wasn’t a single streak of pitch beneath the corpse’s skin. But fierce corpses were not the only undead beings in the world.

And hadn't Su She been cowering in the corner, making occasional wild accusations, a moment ago?

"Will all of you shut up and let A-Jie explain?" Jiang Cheng's whip of lightning crackled on his wrist, warning the person who spoke next of the consequences.

"A-Cheng, play nice." Jiang Yanli reached out to pat Jiang Cheng on the shoulder, but his whip did not stop crackling. "Jin Zixun has spoken to me disrespectfully before. So when he cornered me on the way back to the rooms assigned to my sect, I assumed he was there to tell me how unworthy I was to marry into his family, and how he did not understand why my betrothed changed his mind about me."

"Yanli... you know I could not have been more wrong. I adore you. Nothing is going to happen to you." Jin Zixuan glared at his father, daring Jin Guangshan to contradict him if he still believed his son's loyalties lay with him.

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes, and his whip crackled more intensely, but Jiang Yanli smiled up at her betrothed lovingly. "I know, A-Xuan."

"Son, get away from her." Jin Guangshan snarled, breaking free of his stupor, not because he believed her, but because he could not stand that she had spoken against him.

Jin Zixuan squeezed Jiang Yanli's shoulder, and she reached up to cover his hand with hers. "No," he said simply but with feeling, a more effective refusal than anything else he might have done. Choosing his future wife over his father went against everything society taught, and yet Wei Wuxian thought better of him for it.

"May I continue, Jin-zongzhu?" Jiang Yanli was the picture of politeness, but there were daggers in her eyes. If Jin Guangshan pushed her further, Jin Zixun would not be the only Jin she stabbed that night. Showing he still possessed a sense of self-preservation, Jin Guangshan remained silent.

"Thank you. At first, I thought Jin Zixun was drunk. But when he moved toward me, he shambled on stiff legs, and did not speak. As he got closer, I called out, asking him to stop, he was scaring me, but he didn't respond. It was like he couldn't even hear me. His hands reached out, I thought for my shoulders, but he punched toward my chest like he might tear my heart out and — I am not a strong cultivator, but my mother taught me how to defend myself."

Jiang Yanli shivered, and Jin Zixuan let go of her shoulder to wrap his arms around her waist, pulling her into his side.

Strange. Jin Zixun's actions matched those of a fierce corpse, yet as this Su She had pointed out, his body did not have the markings that distinguished fierce corpses and puppets. Every other type of undead thing was supposed to be autonomous. Yet the Yin Iron broke the natural boundaries between the living and the dead. And wasn't it strange that this Su She, previously cowering beside the dead body he had found, spoke up with remarkable coherency just to point out the lack of those markings?

Lan Zhan caught hold of his hand before Chenqing reached his lips. When Wei Wuxian met his gaze, Lan Zhan shook his head, ever so slightly, and pressed his forefingers against the pulse point of Wei Wuxian's wrist.

Right.

Wei Wuxian could not use resentment to solve this. They needed proof, and it could not come from him, at least not directly. He wasn't trusted enough not to be accused of planting it.

"Has anyone checked the state of Jin Zixun's qi?" Wei Wuxian asked, a seemingly absent question projected loud over renewed bickering.

"I'll do it," Wen Qing squeezed between the sect leaders blocking her way into the guest room before he could tell her to wait, and knelt by the body. But as she reached out for his hand, Jin Zixun sat up in one sudden, movement, and reached out for her throat.

Wen Qing fell back in shock with a shriek, scrambling in her sleeve for peach wood she hadn't expected to need. Out in the crowd, more than one person screamed. With every passing moment, Jin Zixun's eyes grew more focused through the film of death that covered them, though his arms were held straight out, and his legs kicked out, knees refusing to bend, leaving him stuck on the ground.

Though Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue were closer, Mianmian was the first to respond, pushing her own sect leader aside as she stabbed forward with her peach wood sword. She speared Jin Zixun through the neck, and he flailed in jerking movements, before slumping forward, doll-like, over the sword.

Mianmian lurched back, sword in hand, and spun to reach out for Wen Qing. She dropped to her knees cupped Wen Qing's face in her hands, ducking her own head side to side to check her neck for injury. "Are you okay? Did he get you?"

"I'm fine." Wen Qing raised a hand, stained from the spatter of Jin Zixun's blood, to cover Mianmian's. "I should have been more careful."

Jiang Yanli had described him as shambling, but if Jin Zixun had been on his feet when he tried to attack Wen Qing, he would have been forced to hop.

Rigor mortis had set in, which meant Jin Zixun had been dead for at least three shichen.

Which meant he had been killed before the banquet. And by someone who did not have Xue Chonghai's — or Wei Wuxian's own — skill in convincing the dead to move like the living.

Mianmian let of Wen Qing and turned to face the others, her hands balling into fists at her sides. "Jin-zongzhu, how exactly did your nephew become a jiangshi?"

"Are you accusing me?" Jin Guangshan staggered back a step. "You're the one who betrayed me! Carrying on with a Wen and letting us all think you were Hanguang-jun's tragically jilted lover."

“Your belief in a ridiculous rumor is my fault?” Mianmian threw off his outermost layer, the heavy gold material falling over Jin Zixun’s feet. “I’ll take my Wen for a wife and a life among friends any day. I only stayed in your corrupt nightmare of a sect because your son is my friend and I believed it could become something better under him. But he’s decided to let it die with you, and good riddance!”

“Um.” Jin Zixuan said. “Did I forget to mention that?”

Jin Guangshan turned nearly purple with rage, and bellowed despite the rawness of his cough-ravaged voice. “You will *not* be the end of this line, do you hear me?!”

“Fuqin, be careful, you’ll have a qi deviation.” Jin Zixuan stepped toward him with one foot, and stooped, torn though he had already made his decision.

“Now you care, when you’re tearing down my legacy without a moment of hesitation?!” Jin Guangshan shook his head. “I have no son!”

“Please,” someone out in the audience tittered. “We all know he has at *least* five.”

Jin Zixuan sighed as Jiang Yanli patted his hand. “You’re my father, and I do not *want* you dead. But your legacy? You did that yourself. Unless.” He looked through the door, where Meng Yao had knelt to let Nie Huaisang cling to his sleeve. “Meng Yao, would you like a sect?”

Meng Yao blinked in surprised, but it only took him a short moment’s thought to decide. “I don’t think I would, no. It seems more to my advantage to remain where I’m valued and influential than to try to make *his* people mine.”

“When will you Jins stop trying to poach my best adviser?” Nie Mingjue growled through clenched teeth.

“I believe my brother’s attempt was the last, and merely half-hearted, Dage,” Meng Yao smoothly diffused one of the two impending qi deviations while patting Nie Huaisang’s hair. “May I suggest we return our focus to the murderer?”

“Yes,” Lan Xichen said. “I’m eager to know how Jin Zixun was murdered and turned into a jiangshi in the midst of the most powerful cultivators alive.”

The most powerful alive, yes, but also the most powerful dead. And therein lay the problem. This new setback, undoubtedly put into their path by Xue Chonghai, was just another thing keeping Wei Wuxian from finally rescuing his grandmother. If he played Chenqing, Wei Wuxian could force Xue Chonghai to reveal himself. They could turn this fight into a one-on-one battle, and end it all.

Lan Zhan squeezed Wei Wuxian’s hand, and he fell back down to earth. If he failed now, they would lose the chance to procure the piece of Yin Iron that was killing Jin Guangshan without renewing suspicion against Wei Wuxian himself. And Wei Wuxian was not at all certain he could face Yin Iron in the possession of its creator by himself or with Lan Zhan and come out ahead. Much less with all these *people* here.

Thankfully his husband was here to keep him grounded. Wei Wuxian truly had no idea what he would do without him. That one, terrible month had been a blur and an eternity, and he would treat each day with Lan Zhan as the miracle it was.

“Let’s pin down a timeline, then.” Wei Wuxian said. “We know Jin Zixun did not attend the banquet. He was seen alive and typically... himself before it began. As people began to leave, he attacked Jiang-guniang while she was alone. The question is, what happened in between? Wen Ning, did you see where Jin Zixun went after leaving the cave?”

Wen Ning shook his head.

“All right, what were the other Jin disciples doing? Mianmian left—” He gestured to Mianmian, and she took the cue.

“I followed Meng Yao, and convinced him to talk to Zixuan.”

“It was more pleasant than our first few conversations, during the war,” Meng Yao said, with a grimace that belied the generosity of his words, though he did not seem *entirely* displeased. “We arrived at the banquet together.”

“And you, Su She, right? Where were you?” The more interesting question in Wei Wuxian’s book. This was the man who liaised between Jin Guangshan and Xue Chonghai according to Mianmian, who they had all witnessed arguing with Jin Zixun after the Crowd Hunt. He had motive to want Jin Zixun dead, though the same could be said for nearly anyone.

Su She’s lips thinned, and he hugged himself like he wanted to shrink out of existence. “I was doing my duty, of course.”

Jin Guangshan, still dangerously red in the face, blustered through a dismissal. “This is nonsense. As my assistant, of course Su She attended me while I was readying for the banquet. I told Zixun to explore where he pleased. Young men are curious, and he wished to see what had become of the most terrible place in the world with his own eyes.”

“Did you see him again?” Wei Wuxian asked.

“The next time I saw my poor nephew was here, lying murdered in this very room! Who are you to stand there and accuse my most loyal disciple? Where were yours? Any of them could have killed him for you!”

“Wei Ying does not teach demonic cultivation here, Jin-zongzhu.” Lan Zhan speaking up startled even Wei Wuxian. “None of our disciples are capable of this.”

“Again, we are merely expected to accept your word while you question mine!” Jin Guangshan hissed.

If Jin Guangshan thought that would trip him up, it was merely another sign that he assumed everyone was secretly like him, rather than ferreting out the truth with spies. Or his spies simply were not much good.



“Wen Ning or any of my disciples will prove clean of resentment by any test, if someone wishes to perform one.”

Wei Wuxian neglected to mention that he would also test negative for resentment, by any measure. It was only if he was actively using it, or someone knew to search for the channels he had formed within himself to direct it, that his abilities would show. But Jin Guangshan did not need to know that.

“Perhaps if we cannot conclude this matter shortly,” Lan Xichen said. “For now, we are simply trying to establish when and where Jin Zixun died, and was turned into a monster.”

Whatever Lan Zhan had said to him before the banquet had really worked. Among all this chaos, not having to fight his brother-in-law over every little thing was a strange blessing.

Wen Ning cleared his throat, peeking out from behind Wei Wuxian. “Jin-zongzhu, did you say Su She was in your quarters before the banquet? This man here. This is Su She?”

Jin Guangshan came very close to gnashing his teeth, but he locked his jaw, and answered. “Yes, of course, why is that relevant?”

“Oh.” Wen Ning frowned, his brows nearly meeting in the middle. “Because I saw that man with Jin Zixun in the cave by the blood pool.”

As one, the gathered cultivators fixed their eyes on Su She, standing hunched over and frozen.

“That’s right,” Mianmian said slowly. “Su She *was* there. How could he be assisting Jin-zongzhu if he was with us?” She unsheathed her sword, and stepped in front of Wen Qing.

“Well,” Su She reached into his sleeve as he straightened, and pulled out an uneven lump of black metal, its engravings almost worn away with age. “This is inconvenient.”

“You? *You* killed my nephew? You arrogant little bastard! I gave you far more than you deserve, and this is how you repay me?” Jin Guangshan fumbled for his sword among his furs.

“Oh, Jin-zongzhu, don’t think I won’t take you down with me. I’ve been far more conservative in my use of this rock than you, do you really think you can outlast me? *This* is what is killing Jin-zongzhu, by the way. Not some curse from the Yiling Laozu.”

“That’s nonsense,” Jin Guangshan spat.

But Nie Mingjue did not look so certain, reaching over his shoulder to grab the hilt of his massive saber, while Lan Xichen opted for his xiao. Murmuring broke out among the crowd, this time directed not at Wei Wuxian, but at Jin Guangshan. The open secret of his infidelities and harassment and thievery, finally acknowledged outside of whispers in dark corners.

“Is it?” Su She tossed his Yin Iron into the air, and caught it, one-handed. “You all saw the great Chief Cultivator pick up the Yin Iron on the battlefield, though it was promised to the Yiling Laozu. Is that the action of a man who keeps his promises?”

“I have to thank you,” Wei Wuxian spun Chenqing through his fingers, a reminder that he held the power to tear the Yin Iron from Su She anytime he chose. But this was convenient, a report of Jin Guangshan’s guilt from the viperous mouth of his own chief lackey. “For that exposure of Jin-zongzhu.”

“I despised Jin Zixun and his whingeing entitled ineptitude. My uncle this, my uncle that, my uncle will punish you for speaking to me like that!” Su She spat onto Jin Zixun’s face, and the wet mass trailed down his cheek, streaked with blood. “And the worst part was, sometimes he was right. I may not have struck the killing blow, but I wish I had. It felt incredible to make him dance to my whims in death. Now I think I’ll finish the job, and take my place at the right hand of the greatest man to have ever lived. Starting with disposing of the loose ends. Goodbye, Jin-zongzhu. You were the worst sect leader I’ve ever had.”

“Most people only have one,” Wei Wuxian commented, to his husband. Lan Zhan jerked his head toward the active threat of a demonic cultivator, but Wei Wuxian did not miss his suppressed smile.

The Yin Iron began to shake, seeping resentment into the air, and Su She’s hair came loose from his guan, falling lank around his shoulders. Shadows gathered in the crevasses of his face, transforming it into a sunken skull with eyes that burned like coal.

Wei Wuxian didn’t look like *that* when he channeled resentment, did he? Lan Zhan couldn’t possibly be attracted to him if he looked like that.

Hunching over, Jin Guangshan pushed his way into the crowd, trying to lose himself among them, human shields on all sides. Some of the assembled cultivators cut their losses, and ran. Others lifted swords useless against the power of the Yin Iron.

The Yin Iron began to float, and Su She raised his hands with it, calling up a thick coils of resentment with the heads of snakes, like that of the Xuanwu of Slaughter. The ground around them began to tremble, and the ground before the banquet hall cracked apart as skeletal hands broke the surface, disturbing the resting places of the victims of the Burial Mounds one final time.

“Were we expecting that?” Wei Wuxian asked his husband, and Lan Zhan shook his head. “Hmmm. I need to make a box to contain the Yin Iron. Can you handle him?”

The Lan Zhan of a few months past could not have gone up against a single piece of Yin Iron alone. Much less two, if Jin Guangshan realized how fast the tide was turning and used his. But he had grown in strength and creativity, and Wei Wuxian believed in him. He knew how much it meant to Lan Zhan to know that he did.

He was needed in making a place to store the iron once they captured it, so it could not be easily stolen while a container was retrieved.

“Yes,” Lan Zhan said. “With some assistance.”

Mianmian appeared at Lan Zhan’s side, along with Jin Zixuan. “It’s been a while, but we still remember how to fight alongside you.” Lan Xichen and Nie Mingjue joined with Lan Zhan

as well.

“Wangji, I assume you know how to manage this best. We’ll follow your lead.” Nie Mingjue clapped a hand on Lan Xichen’s shoulder in lieu of his brother’s, respecting Lan Zhan’s particularness about touch.

Jiang Cheng had already run off toward the skeletons, while Jiang Yanli joined Wen Qing inside the guest room. Wei Wuxian followed her inside, picking a box up off the shelf, and dumping out the clothes inside. There was a bowl of dry ink on the table, and a cup of cooled tea spilled on the table. Wei Wuxian swiped his forefinger through the water, wet the ink, and began to write characters on the box.

Outside, Lan Zhan prepared to face Su She. Wei Wuxian could not keep himself from glancing up to watch.

Rather than shielding them directly, Lan Zhan directed the shield generated from his guqin at Su She’s Yin Iron itself. Its glow was all but obscured by the time it wrapped fully around the iron, but Lan Xichen picked up the song along the way, and the pitch black of the resentment the Yin Iron emitted was tamed to a smoky gray.

Wei Wuxian doubted it would work quite so well on Xue Chonghai, but his husband had grown powerful. He was a wonder to watch, listen to, experience in every way. He forced his hands to keep moving, glancing down enough to ensure the talismans did not have a character out of place.

As Lan Zhan and his brother played, Nie Mingjue swung his saber wildly, forcing Su She to dodge, distracting him from being too effective in gathering his power while ensuring any less powerful nearby cultivators ran off to help with the skeletons.

But a lash of resentment caught Nie Mingjue hard across the chest, and he went flying, knocking another cultivator the ground among the skeletons when he crashed to the ground.

With Nie Mingjue out of his way and Jin Guangshan nowhere in sight, Su She turned to run, but Jin Zixuan cut him off with the point of his sword pressed against his chest. Resentment gathered around Su She, reeling back like a hooded cobra to strike despite its diminished power, but the delay gave Mianmian just enough time to hook her sword around his throat, pulling his back into her chest.

“Let it drop. Now.” Mianmian snarled.

Su She tried to summon more resentment as he struggled in her grasp, but Mianmian’s blade dug into his mouth, and he went limp in her grasp.

Wei Wuxian glanced down to inspect his work — done.

The remaining resentment fled backwards into its source, and fell from the air. Wei Wuxian danced forward, stepping over bits of skeleton, and caught it in his box. He slammed the lid down, and the oppressive enormity of the Yin Iron’s evil was reduced to a mere creeping wrongness coating his skin. The best he could do, under the circumstances.

When the dust settled, and the cultivators who hadn't run stopped milling about like headless chickens, Jin Guangshan was sprawled out on the ground, his frail frame dwarfed by his furs, his features slackened in death.

Despite his dislike of his father, Jin Zixuan stumbled, falling back into Mianmian's arms. Jiang Yanli rushed over to help support him, and let him shield his face in her chest. Together, the two women help him close.

Jin Guangshan was not the only victim. Bodies made of flesh lay prone among scattered bone, a dozen at least, yet more cultivators numbered among the living than the dead.

Madame Ouyang plucked a dismembered skeletal hand from her husband's hair, and did not sheath her sword, to which had crushed much of the bone that lay fragmented on the soil. "Wei-zongzhu, what, exactly is going on?"

"Well, that's easy enough," Wei Wuxian said. "Jin Guangshan had the Yin Iron stolen because he wanted more power than the title of Chief Cultivator granted, and he has just been betrayed by his co-conspirator. Who seems to have been running around wearing his minion's face, leaving Su She on the hook for his crimes. I'd advise you to gather your disciples, if you can, and make certain they are who they claim."

Wei Wuxian was honestly relieved by how simple the questions was. So he should have expected what came next.

"If the Jin were conspiring, what about *them*?" Sect Leader Yao's hand quivered as he pointed at Jin Zixuan and Mianmian.

# Chapter 28

## Chapter Summary

Wen Qing can't say she didn't sign up for this

## Chapter Notes

Happy belated, current, or future holidays!

Since it's been a good few months since I posted the chapter with this and it'll come up in this one: Mianmian found out in chapter 16 that Jin Guangshan had a mysterious visitor (Xue Chonghai) who was draining the qi of servants and affecting their memories

Way back in the first few chapters, my then-beta and longtime friend asked me if I was going to write qingmian smut and I was like you know what? yes I am! But I don't expect every reader to have signed up for that! As with all the smut in this fic, it's skippable! 💕

**CW:** major character minor injury, minor character death, qingmian smut from: "You can't stand yet." to "Wen Qing, you — Mianmian, really?"

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Wen Qing's heart stopped in her chest as Sect Leader Yao turned on Mianmian.

"What?" Mianmian froze, her sword drawing a thin line of blood from Su She's throat. "Does it look like I'm helping him? Does *anything* we've said or done seem like we were working for Jin Guangshan?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Jin Zixuan scoffed, wiping away blood that dripped from a cut above his eye. Jiang Yanli shifted to stand in front of him, protective even without a weapon.

"*He* betrayed Jin Guangshan for power, how do we know you haven't done the same?" Sect Leader Yao jabbed his finger at Su She. "This cretin admitted he wasn't working alone. Who better positioned to replace Jin Guangshan than his only legitimate son? And if *that girl* can't have Hanguang-jun, Jin Zixuan would make a fine replacement."

Lan Wangji stepped forward, the slight furrow on his brow revealing his displeasure even to strangers. "They are not the problem."

“It makes more sense than asking us to verify the identities of our own disciples!” Sect Leader Yao beckoned to his disciples. “Take the prisoner away from her.”

The accusation was outrageous, but after the Chief Cultivator was revealed to be behind the theft of the Yin Iron, and after his erstwhile disciple attempted to murder them all with that most dreaded of weapons, the remaining cultivators were on a hair trigger. Wen Qing could only watch as a Sect Leader Yao and all four of his disciples tried to wrestle Su She away from Mianmian, pulling her sword away from Su She’s neck and out of her hands in the process, while the rest of the survivors shouted incoherently. There was too much chance of hitting Mianmian to use her needles, with the way they jostled against each other, and so she could not stop Sect Leader Yao from manhandling the woman she loved.

Wei Wuxian shouted for them to stop, conflicted as he glanced down at the box of Yin Iron in his hands. Before he decided whether to intervene, Su She took advantage of the confusion to step on Mianmian’s insole, and stab something long and sharp into her thigh. She let go, all at once. Rather than rush after *him*, Sect Leader Yao continued to pull at Mianmian’s shoulder.

Lan Wangji shook his head at Wei Wuxian, and leapt through the air to cut off Su She’s flight, a graceful blur against which Su She stood no chance.

Wen Qing cast around for something to use as a bludgeon, but Jin Zixuan smashed the hilt of his sword into one of Sect Leader Yao’s disciples. They crumbled, and another whirled around to swing their sword at him. Jin Zixuan did not fight with the intent to win by any means necessary, and so Mianmian was left to fight on her own.

“That is enough!” Nie Mingjue roared, climbing shakily to his feet.

Sect Leader Yao paid no mind. Wei Wuxian shoved the box at Lan Qiren, though he hesitated to take it, delaying Wei Wuxian further. On impulse Wen Qing ran for Mianmian, though she was slower than most cultivators.

But Mianmian was not out of weapons yet. She pulled a pin from her hair, the one Wen Qing had given her, and in a smooth movement, plunged the blade it hid into Sect Leader Yao’s arm.

He shrieked and let her go, giving her the chance to spin away.

And now Wen Qing could do more than scream and join a fight she lacked the skill to end. Her silver needles flew through the air toward Mianmian’s attackers with precise aim, to plunge into the vertebrae at the base of their necks. The muscles of their limbs stopped listening to the directions of their minds. Their eyes rolled back in their heads, and they crumpled to the ground.

Wen Qing was running before Sect Leader Yao hit the ground. Jin Zixuan caught Mianmian before she could fall, and she wrapped her arm around his shoulder. Wen Qing fell to her knees before her, uncaring of the pebbles that dug in through the layers of fabric. Her hands were shaking as she raised them to Mianmian’s thigh, and it took two tries to grab hold of the edges of her robe.

She had to steady them against the solidity of Mianmian's leg before she could peel back the robes, jostling the bone with which Su She had stabbed her as little as possible, to reveal the hole in her pants. Su She had stabbed her with a broken off collarbone that tapered to a thin point. The edges of the wound were slightly jagged, but Wen Qing would have to delve into her to find the extent of the damage.

If only her spiritual energy would go where she directed it. It failed at her fingertips like she was a girl of six, and not a doctor with nearly two decades of experience.

"Hey, hey, I'm still here," Mianmian said, shifting on her uninjured leg as Jin Zixuan readjusted her arm, and the fingers of her free hand brushed Wen Qing's forehead.

She had to breathe. She could only heal Mianmian if she breathed. Wen Qing focused on in and out, in and out, long and deep, holding the air in for a beat each time. Slowly, her energy began to respond.

By the time she felt capable of channeling it, Lan Wangji had returned with Su She at sword point. Out of the corner of her eye, Wen Qing saw Wei Wuxian cleaving back to his husband's side. Those two weren't capable of escaping each others' orbit, drawn together no matter the circumstance. She must have been blind, to think Wei Wuxian's secret would keep them apart for long.

But then, Wen Qing lived in a world where love was not an all-consuming inevitability, but a choice she made every day.

"Shufu," Wei Wuxian was saying as Wen Qing directed her energy into Mianmian, frantic to locate the damage. Wen Qing's energy collected around the injury itself, probing for breached vessels and torn muscle. She forced herself to be thorough, not to risk missing the slightest puncture of a blood vessel by a shard of bone. "Can I prevail upon you to lead your disciples in playing Rest for the dead?"

With Lan Wangji keeping Su She captive, and Lan Xichen fussing over Nie Mingjue, Lan Qiren was the natural choice to play the dead to sleep.

"As cultivators, they should have received the Soul Calming Ceremony, should they not?" Lan Qiren asked.

"The Soul Calming Ceremony ceases to work for those killed directly with the Yin Iron," Wei Wuxian explained. "That's how Jin Zixun was turned into a jiangshi when his soul should have moved on too quickly to be forced back into his body."

"I see." Lan Qiren summoned his guqin, and started to motion for his disciples to join him.

The strings on Lan Qiren's guqin plucked out a trail of dissonant chords before he could set his hands to them. Wen Qing did not know or care what the chords meant, but Lan Qiren translated. "They don't wish for me to play."

"No," Wei Wuxian frowned at a ghost no one else could see. "They say the chance of helping defeat Xue — the man responsible is worth the risk of being used by him."

“Perhaps you should listen,” Lan Qiren banished his guqin.

“The day Old Man Lan is the most logical person around is a dark day indeed.” Mianmian grumbled from above. She didn’t seem like she was in shock. That was good — and she wasn’t getting woozy, either.

The wound was placed such that Wen Qing would have to remove Mianmian’s pants to treat it properly. But in her probing, she found that it had struck muscle, not a major artery, and there were no signs of poison seeping into her blood. Wen Qing needed to get her to a safe, private place, so she could strip her in the last way she had ever wanted to. She wanted Mianmian naked in her bed, not a cot in her infirmary.

Wen Qing related her findings mechanically, the words forgotten the moment they left her mouth. Mianmian hummed her responses, her fingers light on Wen Qing’s scalp, leaving a tingling in their wake.

“Oh, ghosts are sticking around to help us now,” Someone whined from outside Wen Qing’s line of sight. “That’s rich.”

“Did you forget how he won us the Sunshot Campaign?” Someone else asked incredulously.

“None of this explains how those two spies for the Yiling Laozu have been living under Jin Guangshan’s roof, completely unaware.” A third person said from the crowd, and if Wen Qing could see them, and she wasn’t focused on healing Mianmian to the exclusion of all else, she would have thrown a needle, giving them the same treatment as Sect Leader Yao.

Instead, she inserted several needles from the very set Mianmian had given her as a courting gift to numb the pain. “We need to get you out of here. And *don’t* touch that bone. You’ll need stitches, and I don’t want you bleeding everywhere before I can clean the wound properly.”

Mianmian hooked a finger beneath Wen Qing’s chin, lifting her head up. “Treat me once I’ve cleared my name, Qing-jie? I’ll be good and won’t pull out the bone until you tell me I can.”

Wen Qing wanted to insist she be treated now, that there was nothing more important than Mianmian. But that wasn’t strictly true. “Be quick,” she said, because there had to be a world for Mianmian to live in, and for all the others she loved.

“I’ll try.” Mianmian said with a lopsided smile, far too amused considering the circumstances. Her life at risk, with a bone sticking out of her leg. At least the bone wasn’t her own.

Wen Qing let go of Mianmian’s thigh, and turned to stand.

“Has it ever occurred to these people,” Wei Wuxian wondered aloud, making no effort to lower his voice. “Not to make accusations without proof? It seems like they should be learning something after all these false ones.”

“That would be too much to ask.” Wen Qing grumbled under her breath.



“Sect Leader Yao’s actions were rash, yes,” Lan Xichen said. It seemed Nie Mingjue had finally brushed off his and Meng Yao’s hands and the flow of their spiritual energy, permitting Lan Xichen to return to matters at hand. “But if they would be so good as to explain how they knew about Jin Guangshan’s possession of the Yin Iron and told no one, perhaps we can move on to locating the real villain.”

“Xiongzhong, Luo Qingyang has been spying on Jin Guangshan for months,” Lan Wangji said.

Lan Xichen’s face fell. “Yet another thing you failed to tell me.” He blinked, and in the space of a moment, gathered himself together. “And Jin Zixuan?”

Mianmian patted Jin Zixuan on the shoulder with the arm around it. “We have *both* been spying on Jin-zongzhu for months.”

“Mostly Mianmian,” Jin Zixuan conceded, though no one had asked.

“Thank you for acknowledging that.” Mianmian grinned, and winced as her robe brushed the bone before Wen Qing snatched it out of the way again.

Nie Mingjue made a low, contemplative sound in his throat. “I imagine it must have been difficult, to turn against your own father. But he does seem to inspire disobedience in his children.” His words should have been harsh, but his expression, when he looked at Meng Yao, was fond.

Not everyone agreed, and Wen Qing began to think she would have to knock out every cultivator present to get Mianmian away, until Lan Qiren decided to speak.

“Filial Piety is important. However, in this case, I believe it can be interpreted as trying to protect your father from himself.”

Lan Qiren was stodgy, and hide-bound, and yet well-respected. His speaking in favor of the accused caused almost everyone to shut their mouths, and consider.

“Shufu?” Lan Wangji asked, the confusion he barely showed written all across his brother’s face.

Lan Qiren sighed. “I am well acquainted with difficult choices regarding family. I cannot regret mine, because the two of you are the result. But there are choices I regret in how I handled your parents, and their relationship to you.”

“I... do not know what to say to that,” Lan Xichen said, but Lan Wangji had his answer.

“Thank you, Shufu.”

Lan Qiren nodded fondly, and patted each nephew awkwardly on the shoulder.

Wei Wuxian turned the box of Yin Iron around and around in his hands, as impatient as Wen Qing felt. “Mianmian, would you please relate your findings? *Hopefully*, those will suffice to wrap this up.”

Mianmian let Wen Qing hold her hand as she spoke, squeezing tight against the pain, but she spoke with confidence. “You may recall that Lan Wangji was not the only one Wei Wuxian rescued from the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter. He saved us too.” There were nods all around. Some hesitant, as if they *had* forgotten that. “Not long after the theft of the Yin Iron, Lan Wangji wrote to ask if anything strange was happening in Lanling. We may not be lovers, but we are friends, and I already had suspicions of my own.”

Mianmian told of how the servants had been drained of qi, and how one who survived could not recall the face of the man who did that to her. Of the way the very hallways around Jin Guangshan’s office changed when he hosted meetings with his inner circle, and Su She bragging at how indispensable he was.

Now, Su She glowered, but whenever he tried to interrupt, Lan Wangji poked him with the tip of his sword, and Wei Wuxian patted his husband fondly on the arm.

Mianmian told of how no one felt safe in Lanling any more, and any disciple or servant with an excuse to leave Koi Tower, whether for night hunts or a sick aunt, real or invented, had done so in recent weeks, as Jin Guangshan’s mood grew more volatile, and his duties were taken over by his wife, and the miasma beneath Lanling grew to proportions that even the most inured to resentment of ordinary people sensed something was wrong.

Lan Qiren stroked his beard as Mianmian concluded by suggesting that the qi drainings across the cultivation world had been committed by a jiangshi, and that perhaps the thief himself was one. “The part about Su Minshan does not surprise me. When he was a Lan disciple, Su Minshan imitated Wangji in ways that made us all uncomfortable, and lashed out when he chose not to acknowledge him.”

“Shut up, old man.” Su She sneered. “My master will reward me and kill you all any —”

Lan Wangji poked him again in the base of his spine, and Su She yelped.

“From what we can surmise, Su She has a pattern of suctioning onto the most powerful men who will let him, and thinks it makes him powerful until it becomes clear he’s nothing but a replaceable sycophant,” Wei Wuxian said. “He tried it first with Lan Zhan before he betrayed the Lan Sect, then with Jin Guangshan, before deciding this thief was a better option.”

“He can’t expect to reap anything but the consequences of his treachery,” Nie Mingjue said.

“That isn’t true!” Su She cried out. Looking out into the darkness of night, he called for Xue Chonghai, infamous mass murderer, to save him. “Please, I have done all you asked for. Give me what you promised!”

“Please forgive my ignorance, but who could become more powerful than Jin Guangshan, if not his heir?” Sect Leader Ouyang asked. “If we are certain the Yiling Laozu is not the mastermind behind this scheme.”

“You will not believe the answer without the proof of him before your eyes. However, I have a question,” Wei Wuxian said. “Mianmian, where is the other Jin disciple?”

“The... other Jin disciple?” Mianmian asked, gripping Wen Qing’s hand so hard the bones of it ground together. “Jin-zongzhu only brought me, Jin Zixun, and Su She, because he assumed Jin Zixuan would meet us here, even though he said he was surprised to see him when we arrived.”

Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji looked as confused as Wen Qing felt.

“There was a fifth person in gold when you arrived,” Wen Qing said, her tone measured and careful. She twisted her hand free of Mianmian’s grip and placed it on her shoulder.

“No, there wasn’t.” Mianmian insisted.

“Mianmian, we all saw him,” Wen Qing said.

“A very sour looking man. He looked like he had been juiced like a lemon.” Wei Wuxian said.

“That doesn’t sound like *any* cultivator in the Jin Sect.” There was a wildness in her eyes, a pleading that begged Wen Qing to take back her words, and say there had only been four Jins, after all. Somewhere inside herself, Mianmian knew what was wrong, and yet she believed herself to be telling the truth.

“You really didn’t see him at all?” Wen Qing asked. “He was right there, between you and Su She.”

Mianmian shook her head.

“I don’t remember anyone who looked like that, either.” Jin Zixuan said.

“But he *was* right there,” Jiang Wanyin said. “How could you possibly have missed him. A-Jie?”

Jiang Yanli inclined her head, and her betrothed gaped at her when she said, “I saw him, too.”

“Do any of you cultivators who arrived with Jin Guangshan remember such a man?” Wei Wuxian asked the crowd.

Not one of them did, but Nie Huaisang hesitantly raised his hand. “I saw a disciple that looked like that in the banquet hall. And uh, I just found these on the ground?”

He picked up a pair of what were, unmistakably, skin masks from the ground and let them dangle from between pinched fingers with his sleeve separating flesh from flesh, his nose wrinkled in a grimace. Wen Qing very much doubted he had simply found them laying around the guest room while he hid.

Skin masks had been a grotesque favorite of Xue Yang when he was alive and working for Wen Ruohan. Perhaps this would at least lead the cultivators closer to the truth.

“Now you see. *Those* belong to our thief.” Wei Wuxian gestured at the masks as Nie Mingjue grabbed the offending pieces of meat from his brothers’ hands, and threw them on the ground

for everyone to see. Su She's face, stretched out with a gaping hole where his mouth should be, stared up at the sky from empty sockets.

Su She looked distinctly green at the sight of the masks, his struggles ceasing as he stared at his own face made of someone else's skin, with his mouth open in a mirror of the mask.

"Ghosts can affect memory, and so demonic cultivation can too, if they've developed the right technique. Mianmian, you've reported servants speaking of eyes and a gap in their memory? Do *you* remember those eyes?"

"I..." Mianmian shuddered, and Wen Qing ducked under her arm to take her weight from Jin Zixuan, who looked like he had just narrowly avoided being gored by a boar. "I think so. But my memories don't have a gap in time, just in space."

"An interesting theory, Wei-zongzhu," Meng Yao stepped out of Nie Mingjue's shadow. "May I add to it?"

"By all means."

"Su She insisted that he didn't kill Jin Zixun when he set loose the Yin Iron, even though attacking us made the truth of his guilt cease to matter." Bending over the masks on the ground to inspect them, Meng Yao added, "I would bet he disguised himself as Su She to kill Jin Zixun. Did your master kill Jin Zixun, Su She?"

"Of course he did. I was tending to Jin-zongzhu while he hacked up a lung." Su She snapped. "My master killed Jin-zongzhu too, if you're wondering, and no one noticed a thing."

"Did he?" Meng Yao asked with a bland smile. "This looks to me like he planned to use you as a scapegoat, a mere distraction. But I suppose you would know him better. Unless your master didn't tell you he made a mask of your face?"

Su She bared his teeth, but his whole body shook, enough that Lan Wangji was forced to ease up on his sword to avoid mistakenly skewering him. Whether in anger, or in terror at the realization that no one was on his side did not matter.

"Tell them all who your master is," Wei Wuxian demanded. "It's clear he isn't coming to save you. Why defend him any longer when he won't return the favor? Hasn't the Yin Iron whispered to you to take what you deserve? Even from him? Let your final act be one of revenge."

"Yes, revenge. Why not?" Su She laughed, high pitched and broken, uncaring of how hard he jerked back into Lan Wangji's sword, or that the tip came away bloody. "His name is Xue Ch  
—"

A shadow lashed out from atop a roof across the way, and a long, thin projectile whistled through the air, embedding itself in Su She's throat. His declaration cut off in wet gurgling. A bone, just like the one with which he stabbed Mianmian, but resentment leaked from it, creeping into him, turning his veins black even as he died.

The figure, Xue Chonghai, jumped down from the roof and became a swirl of energy that moved toward the banquet hall, and toward the remaining piece of Yin Iron. Toward his sword, watched over by Baoshan Sanren.

Lan Wangji was quick to cut off Su She's head, though his body lay prone on the ground. Jin Zixuan borrowed a peach wood sword from Wen Ning, and drove it through Su She's heart for good measure.

"Don't follow him!" Wei Wuxian shouted, and Nie Mingjue and Jiang Wanyin, both of whom stopped mid-stride, with Jiang Wanyin overbalancing and nearly falling on his face. "We need to go as a group. Xue —the person who killed Jin Zixun and Su She is also the thief Jin Guangshan hired to steal the Yin Iron."

"The one who killed your disciples, Xiongzhang." Lan Wangji said. "He will be heading deep into the Burial Mounds, where we've hidden something he wants."

"Your disciples," Lan Xichen repeated, dismayed by Lan Wangji's separation of himself from Gusu Lan, and cleared his throat. "We will accompany you to find him, of course." He spoke for himself, Nie Mingjue, and Meng Yao.

"I as well," Lan Qiren declared.

Lan Wangji grabbed for his husband's wrist, his only outer sign of distress. "Shufu, are you certain?"

"I cannot let my nephews face this demonic cultivator who has terrorized the land for months without me." Lan Qiren harrumphed to show what he thought of that.

Mianmian started to speak up, breaking off when Wen Qing jabbed her in the thigh with her finger, a short distance from her injury. "You, Mianmian, are coming with me. Don't think I've forgotten you were *stabbed* in the *thigh*. I'm not letting you go without treating that."

"If you wanted to get me alone, all you had to do was say so," Mianmian tried to tease, but it fell flat. She was still shaken from the revelation that her perception had been altered. "But they'll need me there."

No, it was Wen Qing who needed her, needed her to be okay. Wen Qing had been forced to content herself with stolen glances all evening, with secret messages for months. It wasn't anywhere near enough.

"Go with her," Jin Zixuan urged. "There's no reason to get yourself killed when you can barely walk."

Mianmian sighed. "You're right. I'll only slow you down."

Together, they shifted Mianmian's weight fully onto Wen Qing, and Jin Zixuan went to stand with his future brother-in-law, waylaid briefly for a kiss on the cheek from his betrothed.

"You're going off to fight and leaving us here?" A man in the pink of Laoling Qin demanded, the sect leader who had been Jin Guangshan's closest ally now listless without him.

What did they expect? Wen Qing wanted to demand. After so many false accusations, did they think themselves entitled to bodyguards, courtesy of Yiling Wei?

But Wei Wuxian had a more diplomatic answer. Proof that, despite his protests, he was coming into his own as a sect leader.

“Stick together in groups, and if you choose to stay in the guest rooms, please lock down the doors and again, don’t be alone. If you have the energy to fly, please feel free to take your leave, but I would not recommend walking through the forest when we do not know where the thief is.”

“I will help direct them,” Jiang Yanli volunteered. “As I fear I would not be any help where you are going. I can also help patch up some of these wounds, if Wen Qing could lend me a few disciples? I understand that you would not want your betrothed to stay near the people who accused her.”

“Qing-jie, you *could* stay and help —”

Wen Qing cut her off. “I’ll send them back this way.”

Jiang Yanli smiled as she got to work, a hurricane of a woman sweeping even the most intransigent of cultivators up in her wake.

Wei Wuxian led the Jiang sect and Jin Zixuan into the tunnels in one direction, while Lan Zhan led his brother, uncle, and the disciples of the Nie sect minus Nie Huaisang in the other. Wen Qing led Mianmian in a different direction, toward the clinic, linked to her own rooms.

As they slowly made their way, Mianmian hopping with most of her weight on Wen Qing, it soon became clear that at least some of the cultivators who fled the scene rather than stay and fight had met a far worse fate.

They came across multiple bodies as Wen Qing supported Mianmian on the way to her clinic. Mianmian insisted on stopping at each one, and leaning down awkwardly to stab it in the heart with her peach wood sword. They could not take any more chances.

“Xue Chonghai must have charged himself up on qi while everyone was distracted,” Wen Qing surmised.

“All those disciples running around like chickens with their heads cut off,” Mianmian shook her head. “The perfect opportunity to make himself an army of jiangshi.”

Wen Qing wasn’t so sure. “I doubt Xue Chonghai would expend the energy to turn them to jiangshi when he just went and killed his best distraction, and he knows we have weapons to use against them.”

Peach wood would not keep the corpses from getting up and walking away, and it was far easier to control a mindless fierce corpse than one with a soul, or a jiangshi.

Mianmian tilted sideways on one leg, relying on Wen Qing to keep her from falling, and lodged the wooden sword in another heart. “Just in case.”

The disciples of Yiling Wei were not among the dead, having been warned in explicit detail of the dangers that would come of not sticking together, and hiding at the first sign of something wrong. Armed with the proper weapons to kill a Jiangshi for good, and therefore more of a threat than more experienced cultivators with only steel swords and flares of energy at their disposal. Xue Chonghai had merely taken advantage of the early prey.

Wen Qing and Mianmian stumbled together into the clinic, and found the room already lit, the disciples the Jin had handed to them, by treating them as disposable. Two helped her guide Mianmian to the cot, before Wen Qing did as she’d promised, and sent them off to help the injured cultivators, with a warning *not* to touch any bodies until they found Jiang Yanli, and to keep their peach wood at the ready.

To a one, they promised they would obey. And bustled out the door with baskets full of the tools of their trade.

“Sit, while I figure out whether I’ll have to cut off your pants.”

“I knew you couldn’t resist having your way with me,” Mianmian joked weakly, but her face had paled around the edges from the pain, despite the needles’ numbing effect. And she had wanted to run off and fight an ancient demonic cultivator turned jiangshi.

Wen Qing rolled her eyes. “Yes, your bleeding is irresistible. I’m going to cut them off.”

“You can use my switchblade,” Mianmian handed it over, still coated in Sect Leader Yao’s blood. That didn’t matter much since she wasn’t going to use it on Mianmian’s broken skin. She made a notch in the waistband, and ripped down the side, until she reached the needles. Those, she had to pluck out and Mianmian clenched her jaw, speaking through the pain. “Weapons really are the best courting gifts. You’ve picked. So well. Fuck.”

The fabric parted around the bone as Mianmian bit back a scream, panting heavily. Wen Qing pulled the fabric apart a bit more, and from there, it would be easier to remove what remained of her pants the traditional way. “Without putting weight on your injured leg, raise your hips for me.”

Placing her hands at Mianmian’s waist, Wen Qing eased her fingers under the waistband of her pants Mianmian leaned back on her elbows, and pushed up her hips, just long enough for Wen Qing to pull the cloth out from beneath her ass, before Mianmian collapsed back down on the cot. She peeled them off the rest of the way, too preoccupied with Mianmian’s injury to appreciate the patch of dark hair between her legs. For now.

Wen Qing offered Mianmian a strip of leather to bite down on, but she stuck her knuckles in her mouth instead.

“I’m going to pull the bone out now.” In one quick motion, she yanked out the bone, leaving the edges of the wound no more jagged than they had begun, though a thread from her pants

had embedded itself within. “You need stitches, once I get this fiber out of the wound, and give it a good cleaning.”

Wen Qing grabbed a pair of tweezers from her kit, wiped them down with strong alcohol, and fished out the fiber as quickly as she could. Pouring more alcohol onto a cloth, she wiped up the blood spilling from the wound with it.

Mianmian hissed as the alcohol burned over the gash, but the pain in her expression eased as Wen Qing started channeling spiritual energy into her. “Shouldn’t you save that energy for someone more seriously injured?”

“Not tonight. Not ever, when you’re injured.” Her voice low, Wen Qing confessed, “I can’t stand to see you bleed.”

“Then we’ll have a bit of a problem every month. Shouldn’t a doctor know about these things?” Mianmian’s voice was still strained, but the flow of blood had slowed enough from the application of spiritual energy to make her work easier.

Wen Qing swiped the cloth over the wound again. “You know what I mean. If my future wife could only refrain from having anything stuck into her body that I did not put there, I would appreciate that greatly.”

Wen Qing unwrapped a cloth embroidered with a talisman that kept its contents fresh and clean to reveal a spool of thread. She threaded a needle, pushed the edges of the wound together and began to sew, quickly and deftly. Mianmian winced repeatedly with every stitch, but proved to be the best patient Wen Qing had ever had. It was no time at all before Wen Qing tied off the thread.

“No promises about my fingers.” Mianmian wiggled her brows suggestively. “Wait. Future wife?”

Wen Qing had not meant to say that.

“Is that all right?” Wen Qing asked, her nerves suddenly welling back up to confuse her. They had never talked about marriage as an end point to courting. She didn’t know if Mianmian would want that some day, or when. She started wrapping Mianmian’s leg, so she did not have to look at her expression.

Mianmian pushed herself up far enough to cup Wen Qing’s chin. “Only if my future wife starts getting some sleep.”

“I could be persuaded, if you were there with me.”

Mianmian’s breath caught, startled by Wen Qing finally flirting back. “That can be arranged.”

Wen Qing tied off the bandage, and pressed her lips to the skin just below the knot. Mianmian’s leg kicked out, and she nearly crushed Wen Qing’s nose with her knee.

“Well, at least we know your reflexes are working.” Wen Qing was helpless not to smile.



Mianmian reached out to her with grabbing hands. “Come here, before my wild bucking knees kick you in the face.”

“Mmm, no. I think I’ll stay right here.” Wen Qing could not think of anywhere she’d rather be than right here. She nuzzled the soft skin of Mianmian’s inner thigh with her nose.

“What are you doing?” Mianmian asked, apprehensive, and so Wen Qing paused to look up at her.

“I love you, Luo Qingyang,” Wen Qing said. “It’s taken me far too long to admit it.”

“You called me your future wife *before* you said those three words.”

“So, technically, did you.”

“I love you, Wen Qing. And I should go.” Mianmian tried to push herself to her feet, but Wen Qing put a hand on her hips to keep her seated.

“You can’t stand yet. Don’t try me on this.” Wen Qing cared about the others, knew any backup would be welcome, and likely necessary, but she was a doctor, and the woman she loved was her patient. If Mianmian intended to fight again tonight, she needed to be out of danger of ripping her stitches, her energy replenished with Wen Qing’s. “But, if you want to join them tonight, Dual Cultivation will heal you faster. If you want.”

Mianmian hesitated. “This is not how I imagined this. Fucking in a rush with our friends in danger.” But then she sat back on her hands, her legs relaxing to give Wen Qing free access, and Wen Qing could see she was wet already, dripping even, smell the musk of her arousal. “Though I can’t pretend I’ve never found the thought of you tending to me appealing. Do you know how many stories about romancing the aloof doctor I borrowed off the mountain’s shelves in those months I spent flirting, and you spent pretending not to notice?”

“Then let me tend to you.” Wen Qing said eagerly, too eagerly to pretend this was just for healing. She didn’t care. She didn’t think Mianmian did either.

“Yes, doctor, I’ll be good.” Mianmian lay back, giving her a sultry look from beneath her lashes.

As if Wen Qing needed more temptation. She leaned in, and gave a single, teasing lick to Mianmian’s clit. “Oh!” Mianmian jolted in surprise, her back arching.

“You’re sensitive,” Wen Qing observed. Important information, she would have to note that down for future testing.

“I have you between my legs. How could I not be?” Mianmian panted as Wen Qing returned to her task, tracing light circles into Mianmian’s uninjured thigh as she held her hips down with the other, and licked over the length of her entrance. Mianmian shrieked, and broke off into giggles. “Is this what you’re like in bed?” She demanded between gasps for breath, “A tease?”

Wen Qing did not reply. The truth was, she did not know. She could only learn by experimentation, which she hoped to have plenty of opportunity for now that Mianmian was free of the Jin Sect.

Though Wen Qing held her down, Mianmian was strong, trying to squirm at even the slightest pressure on her clit, her sounds unabashed and urgent and interspersed with swears, encouraging Wen Qing to bring her off quickly. Wen Qing angled each pass of her tongue to pass over the spot that made Mianmian cry out the loudest, until her voice broke off and she shuddered violently. Her hips bucked, forcing Wen Qing to pull back before she had fully worked Mianmian through her orgasm.

“You have it in for my nose tonight,” She said.

“Fuck. Sorry,” Mianmian lay limp now, the tension gone out of her. Her hair had gone loose in its bindings, and a strand fallen in her face. She didn’t bother to swipe it away, just looked sideways at Wen Qing with her cheek pressed to the cot. “I didn’t know I would react like that.”

“That’s all right. We’ll learn together.” Wen Qing pressed a kiss to Mianmian’s clit and quickly drew away as she twitched with an aftershock to save her poor nose from further injury. “I like having this effect on you.”

“I didn’t feel much spiritual energy from you,” Mianmian said, the breathiness of her voice betraying that she knew Wen Qing was not done with her yet.

“I know. That’s why I’m going to fuck you with my tongue now.” Wen Qing dove back into Mianmian’s cunt, and did just that.

She poured her spiritual energy into the thrusting of her tongue, making sure to scrape along the sensitive patch on her upper wall, translating knowledge to action along the way. She shifted her hand to rest over Mianmian’s pelvis, rubbing her clit with her thumb in blind, inexpert circles, but it seemed to work anyway. Mianmian’s thighs closed around her head, trapping her there, her hands tugging at Wen Qing’s hair.

A shock of pleasure ran through Wen Qing, and she rubbed her thighs together, finding a slickness there already dampening the fabric of her pants.

This time, when Mianmian came, Wen Qing got to feel her walls clenching around her tongue, and an answering throb between her own legs, the cooling heat of her own fluids dripping from her cunt. She lapped up everything Mianmian gave her until she stilled entirely, feeling warm and immensely pleased with herself.

Finally, Wen Qing sat back on her heels, her tongue slipping out to taste the wetness on her cheek. Her tongue felt too big for her mouth, but she asked, “How are you feeling?”

Rather than answer, Mianmian sat up in one smooth motion and pulled Wen Qing up to straddle her lap, kneeling so none of Wen Qing’s weight rested on her injury as she untied Wen Qing’s belt and parted her robes. “My turn.”

“Your thigh — “ Wen Qing protested, only for Mianmian to shake her head.

“The wound is sealed, thanks to you.”

“Don’t you dare reopen it,” Wen Qing hissed as Mianmian’s hand found its way inside her pants. Mianmian’s smile turned lopsided and smug when she found Wen Qing slick and wanting for her. She slipped two fingers inside Wen Qing, their circumference just wide enough around for there to be a slight burn before she adjusted, and the slow build of pleasure took over.

Wen Qing had never been sensitive the way Mianmian was, but Mianmian was quick to find a rhythm that Wen Qing was helpless to resist, her hips grinding against her hand.

“Fuck, you’re so beautiful.” Mianmian stared up at her in awe, and then at her tits bouncing at eye-level. Mianmian leaned forward to seal her lips over Wen Qing’s left nipple, sucking and drawing away with a scrape of her teeth when Wen Qing’s movements grew too much for her.

Wen Qing threw her head back and rode Mianmian’s fingers with abandon, pushing into the urgent pressure against her clit as Mianmian laved attention on one breast and then the other. Her orgasm snuck up on her, taking the world away with it, and when her head cleared, Wen Qing found herself sprawled out on the cot with Mianmian beside her.

She twined the loose lock of Mianmian’s hair loosely around her fingers. The wound would not split open easily now, after all Wen Qing had transferred to help her heal. Mianmian would get up in a moment, and go to join the others. And Wen Qing would have to go with her, because there was no chance of the fight against Xue Chonghai ending without casualties, because she wasn’t going to let Mianmian go alone.

Though nothing was settled, their very tomorrows up in the air, Wen Qing couldn’t help but wonder what came next, if they were both still standing in the aftermath. “You’re a free woman without a sect. Do you have any plans after tonight?”

Wen Qing was fishing, but Mianmian had never promised her anything more than a second chance. What if she didn’t want to join another sect so soon? Or at all?

This was Wen Qing’s home, where her brother was, where her little cousins would soon join her, and where she could easily access the rest of her family with a talisman and a very special tree.

Mianmian was a free spirit who had been trapped in a role with strict boundaries for most of her life. She deserved everything she wanted from life, even if it wasn’t from Wen Qing.

“I have my sword and the clothes on my back.” Mianmian stretched hands over her head, her mouth pulled into a cheeky smirk. “That seems like enough to conquer the world, don’t you think?”

“Mianmian.”

“You’re right, Qing-jie, I’ll need the keepsakes packed away in my qiankun bags, and especially your courting gifts.” She pulled Wen Qing closer, bumping their foreheads together. “And you to be there when I come home from every night hunt.”

Wen Qing’s heart thumped in her chest, her ears resonating with its echo.

Mianmian frowned, her eyes roaming over Wen Qing’s face from up close. “Why do you look surprised? Did you... not expect me to stay with you? I thought we were past that. You said you love me. You said it.”

“I do love you.” Hadn’t she already proven that? “But I thought you might want to travel. To make your own way in life.”

Mianmian’s nose scrunched up. “Silly. Even if I do want to travel, that doesn’t mean I can’t have a home. I don’t know if I want to join Yiling Wei just yet, but something tells me your sect leader won’t care what I decide, so long as I make you happy. And Qing-jie, the one thing I do know is that I’m not finished courting you.”

“And how long do you intend to court me for?” Wen Qing asked, scarcely able to breathe her ears, when Mianmian said, “Why, I’ll court you forever, Qing-jie, even after we’re married.”

That sounded good to Wen Qing. “I have another gift for you. It’s on a shelf, over there somewhere.”

This gift was decorative, a jade bracelet to show her commitment, but Wen Qing would have to return to supplying Mianmian with sharp objects, and get creative about with the weaponry, since she appreciated the hairpin and scabbard so very much. Wen Qing was not a fighter herself, but she could arm her warrior so well no one would ever get the drop on her again.

“What about the gift that’s right here?” Mianmian rubbed her thumb across Wen Qing’s lips.

Wen Qing nipped the skin, and found it replaced by soft lips in the space of a blink. They had scarcely kissed, before, just that once in the infirmary at war, a thing dimly remembered and yet replayed over and over again in her mind. She had been exhausted then, more than half-asleep, resisting her feelings.

This was so much better, and so much more meaningful. She was ready now, where she had not been all those months before, and that made all the difference.

Mianmian sucked on her lower lip until Wen Qing’s mouth opened, and she let go with a fleeting bite to delve into her with tongue. Her hands swept down Wen Qing’s back until they reached her ass, using it to pull them Wen Qing flush against her. Wen Qing let her lower arm get trapped between them where Mianmian’s robes had fallen open, squeezing her tit lightly as she marveled at the weight of it in her hand.

Even with the residue of Mianmian’s pleasure drying on her jaw, it was difficult to believe this was really happening. That Mianmian sweeping her away until she was dizzy and careless was reality and not a dream, a clever new torture devised by her uncle to manipulate

her. But her free hand grazed over Mianmian's thigh, across the bandages, and Wen Qing had never fantasized about fucking her for the first time in her clinic, and no nightmare or manipulation could imagine something so perfectly imperfect.

She sighed into Mianmian's laps, meaning to pull her on top of her —

And the door crashed open, despite the locks. Wen Qing threw a blanket over Mianmian's lap, while Mianmian grabbed the nearest sharp object, which happened to be the pair of tweezers.

“Wen Qing, you — Mianmian, really? You two are just as bad as Wei Wuxian and Lan Wangji,” Jin Zixuan whined, slapping his hands over his eyes.

“Do you *really* think you're any better?” Jiang Wanyin snapped as he did the same. At this point, Wen Qing was relatively certain Jiang Wanyin lived in a constant state of irritation, and Jin Zixuan's relationship with his sister certainly wasn't helping.

“Turn around, both of you.” She ordered.

They obeyed, still covering their eyes. “I assume Mianmian's okay, if you were, you know —”

“I'm *much* better,” Mianmian jumped to her feet, only favoring her injured leg a little, and Wen Qing found a spare pair of pants for her, left in the infirmary in case a patient needed them.

While Mianmian put them on, Wen Qing gathered every portable item she could think of along with her usual kit, including every poultice to chase off resentment from a wound she had in her possession.

“You came to get me, didn't you? Where do you need me?” She asked the boys.

“We left them in Wei Wuxian's workshop,” Jin Zixuan said.

“Is it Lan Yi?” Was it too late, had they run out of time? Jin Zixuan shook his head, glancing nervously at Jiang Wanyin. “I think maybe it's best you see the situation for yourself.”

## Chapter End Notes

Only three more chapters!

[Promo Tweet](#)

# Chapter 29

## Chapter Summary

Xue Chonghai is very, very certain he is going to win

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** Minor character death (I'm sorry about this one), Minor character injury, body horror

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Lan Xichen knew his reputation as the most easygoing of sect leaders, level-headed and fair. The elders of his clan praised him as forward thinking, yet respectful of tradition. Everything a leader of Gusu Lan should be. Wangji was the reverse yet no less worthy, strictly adhering to the rules to the exclusion of all else, even, especially his own desires. It was not a good quality for a leader expected to engage in negotiations with those outside the sect without causing offense, but made him a virtuous second son.

The Twin Jades were perfect for their roles.

Lan Xichen had never questioned that view of his brother. He had hoped that one day, Wangji would find friends who appreciated him for himself, a lover who did not want him to change. That Wangji would have the kids Lan Xichen knew he secretly wanted, and they would grow up in the Cloud Recesses, doted on by their father, uncle, and great-uncle. That was why, when rumor said he loved a strong, clever girl, and she loved him back, Lan Xichen had wanted so badly to believe it.

The Yiling Laozu had made the perfect villain in his mind, a demonic cultivator demanding Wangji's hand in marriage, stealing him away from his home. The antithesis of everything the brother Lan Xichen knew could ever want. Even after he learned Wangji would never want any woman — like Lan Xichen himself — Lan Xichen found it impossible to believe Wangji could want someone that would take him so far from the life he had always known. So far from Lan Xichen's side.

Someone who looked at tradition and rules and tore them down without a second thought.

He *must* have done something to Wangji. There was no other explanation.

Lan Xichen had thought his suspicions confirmed when he saw the marks around Wangji's wrists that afternoon, until the model of the world Lan Xichen had built up in his mind came crashing down around his ears.

Now, following Wangji through the dark tunnel, jumping at imagined ghosts with every flicker of the torches that lined the wall, every cool breeze across the back of his neck that seemed to come from nowhere, Lan Xichen wondered if he had ever known his brother at all. If Wangji had been waiting for someone to tell him he did not need to be perfect, that he got to decide who he wanted to be no matter other people's expectations.

Here in Yiling, in the Burial Mounds — turned back to ghastly horror for this one night — Wangji was beloved, and not only by his husband. He did not hesitate to speak his mind, even if it challenged tradition. He made choices for his own sake, not merely for that of others.

Wangji had flourished outside the Cloud Recesses, and it made Lan Xichen feel guilty, that he still wanted him to come home.

"Who is this murderous thief, and what is it he wants from your husband?" Shufu kept a hand against the wall as he walked to keep himself steady in the dim lighting.

"Wei Ying was telling the truth when he said you would not believe the thief's identity without seeing it with your own eyes." Wangji kept his eyes on the passage ahead, his tone inscrutable. "What he wants... there are more than three pieces of the Yin Iron."

"There are four pieces, but one is lost to the world," Shufu said, filling in the blanks.

"No, Shufu, there are five." With that, Wangji turned to walk directly into the wall beside them. Lan Xichen flinched, expecting Wangji to bang his head against the rock — but he vanished into it, just like the illusion they'd passed through to enter the tunnels.

"Five pieces of Yin Iron," Lan Xichen repeated. "Do you think...?"

"Only one way to find out." Dage gave him a heavy pat on the shoulder and followed Wangji through the hidden door without another moment's hesitation, his three disciples on his heels.

"I am learning," Shufu said, "that Wangji is perhaps the wisest of us," and he walked through as well.

"I'm learning that too," Lan Xichen muttered to no one. Or, perhaps, to a murderer lurking in the dark.

He stepped through the wall.

If what Wangji was hiding *was* his husband's possession of the remaining pieces of Yin Iron, Lan Xichen could take a leap of faith, for once in his life, and trust that he had a reason for keeping it secret. He did trust Wangji, as he had promised him earlier, and so he could grant Wangji's husband a moment to explain before he revisited his assumption that the Yiling Laozu had twisted his brother's mind, and acted on it.

Wei Wuxian had beaten them there, and he stood a short distance away, holding Wangji's hands and looking at him with nothing but what Lan Xichen was increasingly forced to acknowledge was love in his eyes. Further within, Jin Zixuan was introducing Jiang Wanyin to a woman who appeared to be in her mid-thirties yet felt far older, like a grandmother of grandmothers. Yet dangerous, as if they all lived and breathed on her forbearance.

On the floor was an array, a sword smoking with dark resentment at its center. And a woman seated at a point like a sacrifice.

Lan Wangji did not know how to address his family's questions without them seeing the truth for themselves, but it was better than sending his brother and uncle off with his husband.

Xue Chonghai was nowhere to be seen when Lan Wangji entered the workshop, but Wei Ying was standing by the array, staring down at Lan Yi seated within it. She looked small and frail, shrinking away with each day, like she might turn to dust at the touch of a light breeze.

"Wei Ying," Lan Wangji said, and his husband startled. He was not usually so slow to notice Lan Wangji's presence. Lucky it had been him who arrived next, and not Xue Chonghai.

Wei Ying turned to face him, and reached out for his hands. Lan Wangji took them, and found them chilled, though Wei Ying usually ran warm. "So Xue Chonghai evaded both of us, then."

"He has no choice but to come here," Lan Wangji assured him.

"I know." Wei Ying let his forehead fall forward to rest on his shoulder. "I just..."

Over Wei Ying's shoulder, Lan Wangji could see that sketched out on an open space on the floor was the array Wei Ying had designed to destroy the Yin Iron. The sword pierced into rock at its center, and the two pieces of Yin Iron already in their possession were each encased in boxes at opposite ends of the axis points. Lan Yi sat cross-legged at another point of the array, her eyes closed but her brow furrowed in focus.

"Xue Chonghai?" Xiongzhong asked. "But Xue Chonghai's been dead for — for — What *is* this?"

"Why do you have a woman in an array?" Nie Mingjue asked bluntly. At his side, Meng Yao pinched the bridge of his nose and muttered something like, *I wouldn't have put it quite like that.*

Wei Ying lifted his head to say, "I swear, this isn't what it looks like. I am not in the habit of placing my elders in sacrificial arrays. Not that These are my grandmothers, and I just got here." He looked over his shoulder. "Waipo, why is A-Ma in the array?"

Baoshan Sanren stared mournfully down at her wife. "Niangzi believes that the array will work best if those the Yin Iron has affected are part of the circle when we destroy it."



“Fair point.” Wei Wuxian wrinkled his nose. “Why didn’t she let me know earlier? I need to think about it, but it should be possible, to adjust for A-Ma’s presence.

“This array is meant to destroy the Yin Iron?” Lan Qiren asked.

“And to free my wife from its taint, yes.” Baoshan Sanren confirmed.

“Your wife.” Xiongzhong frowned at her, squinting as he tried to place her. “Who, precisely are you?”

Baoshan Sanren sat on one of the waist-high benches Wen Ning had built for his experiments, already covered with odds and ends. She did not look like a grandmother, unless that grandmother was the most famed person in the history of the cultivation world. Lan Wangji felt her presence should be self-explanatory. Apparently, it wasn’t.

“You think of me as a myth,” Baoshan Sanren said. “Hidden away from the world on a mountain, who rogue cultivators occasionally claim as their master, and you’re never quite sure whether to believe them. Just as you aren’t certain whether to believe your eyes now.”

“Waipo,” Wei Ying whined, raising his head mid eyeroll. “Is this really the time to be cryptic?”

“I didn’t conceal anything.” And to the others she said, simply, “I am the immortal Baoshan Sanren.”

Lan Wangji suspected that Baoshan Sanren enjoyed the opportunity to be dramatic, just like Wei Ying, but it could not be easy knowing how soon they would know.

“Then — is that Lan Yi in the array?” Shufu asked, astounded.

Lan Wangji nodded in confirmation. Though how Shufu would know of Baoshan Sanren’s association with Lan Yi, he did not know. He had read every text on Lan Yi in the Cloud Recesses cover to cover, forwards and backwards — which meant there must be information on her hidden away in the Room of Forbidden Books.

“Lan Yi has been hidden away by Baoshan Sanren all this time,” Shufu concluded, and Baoshan Sanren inclined her head regally. “I was never certain if our records were truthful as to how her tenure as sect leader ended. But then Wangji saw her in the cold pond cave, and I didn’t know what to believe.”

Shufu stared down at Lan Yi, his expression conflicted. Meng Yao joined him by the array, but seemed to study it with an academic interest. After a moment, he engaged Shufu in a whispered conversation.

“But if you’ve had pieces of the Yin Iron all this time, why have you not destroyed them before?” Xiongzhong asked, and Nie Mingjue made a low, aggressive sound in his throat, and reaching behind his back to grab Baxia’s hilt, though he did not draw it. He stepped in close to Xiongzhong’s side, which also happened to be fully in front of Meng Yao, until Meng Yao

stepped out from behind him, his expression something Lan Wangji was coming to identify as fond exasperation. Mostly because Wen Qing wore it around Wei Ying, constantly.

“The pieces of Yin Iron must all be present when they are destroyed, or the backlash will kill the one who cast it, along with anyone connected to it.

Xiongzhong blinked, tilting his head. “Would that not be good? If it killed the thief you say is Xue Chonghai?”

“If it *only* killed him, yes—” Wei Ying began, but Baoshan Sanren interrupted him, getting to her feet.

“You wish me to give up my wife? My grandson, and his husband, when they perform the ritual? You wish to lose your nephew? No, I will not allow that kind of needlessly altruistic bullshit. Destroying them one by one would require five deaths at minimum. Even I would not be an exception.”

Though Baoshan Sanren was not a tall woman, she gave the impression of towering over them all, as if all it would take for her to become the greatest enemy any of them would ever meet was the wrong word from Xiongzhong, one wrong word from Nie Mingjue, and damn the morals and traditions of the cultivation world.

Xiongzhong stumbled back into Nie Mingjue’s broad, steady chest.

Baoshan Sanren had always presented herself as a kindly grandmother to him, though he knew she was capable of much more. But even in the vision of Xue Chonghai’s past, she had not flaunted her power to near this degree.

A year ago, Lan Wangji would have been just as horrified, if not more. Of course anyone should be willing to give their life, even their loved ones for a worthy cause. The disciplines said as much, line after line. But now, having found a life and a love worth fighting for, having met his childhood role model outside the pedestal of carefully curated books, having learned to bend, he agreed with Baoshan Sanren.

Anyone who wanted to take Wei Ying from him would do so over not only his dead body, but his exterminated soul.

“I see,” Xiongzhong said, and Baoshan Sanren deflated back into herself.

Lan Wangji sighed, relieved. Xiongzhong had always been the more flexible between them, until recently. It was good to see that had not entirely changed, now that his doubts regarding Wei Ying were, if not dismissed entirely, belayed.

“How exactly does the array work?” Xiongzhong asked. “Why do you need Wangji?”

Lan Wangji squeezed Wei Ying’s hands tight, and avoided his brother’s gaze. Wei Ying squeezed back and did not answer, respecting Lan Wangji’s silent wish.

Meng Yao was not so careful. “Well, it looks like the array requires two people, as the honorable Baoshan Sanren mentioned earlier, and, well —” He broke off, grimacing.

“Demonic cultivation is required,” Baoshan Sanren said, since no one else was willing. She stood at the edge of the array, staring wistfully down at her wife, still deep in meditation. “A small price to pay for the world.”

“Why would that be an issue? Wei Wuxian already cultivates resentment, every day —” It dawned on Xiongzhong.

“No, no, demonic cultivation? Wangji? You can’t ask that of him!”

Baoshan Sanren stepped around the array, her power in her bearing. She did not need to put on her earlier show for Xiongzhong to take the threat of displeasing her seriously.

“I searched for centuries for a way to save my wife, but it took my A-Xian’s unconventional thinking to find a solution. The *only* solution. If you Lans think for a *moment* that you will get in the way of her only chance, then I will send you flying all the way back to the Cloud Recesses. Do you understand me?”

Nie Mingjue began to draw Baxia, but stopped when Xiongzhong placed a hand on his arm. “Yes.”

“Good, that will make this —”

A spear of resentment ripped past him through the entrance of the chamber. Wei Ying pulled Chenqing from the air, raising his dizi to block the resentment in its path, but it reached its target before he could play the first note, stuffing itself into Baoshan Sanren’s open mouth instead. She went stiff, her back arching for a suspended moment and collapsed into convulsions, trying to expel the foreign energy,

Wei Ying lurched toward her, but froze, looking back, conflicted, toward the entryway.

Lan Yi’s focus broke as her wife collapsed to the ground, and she tried to stand, but her legs could no longer hold her weight. Instead she crawled, slowly and carefully, with great difficulty, to her wife. Gingerly, Lan Yi pulled Baoshan Sanren’s head into her lap.

In the doorway stood a man still shrouded in the near darkness of the tunnel, his mouth twisted into a terrible triumphant grin.

Xue Chonghai had followed them there, rather than going ahead, seeking to block them in with an ambush of overwhelming power. He stepped into the light, and his two pieces of Yin Iron spun above him, linking together only to repulse in a shockwave that spread a miasma of unease through the room. “It’s so good of you all to gather together for me. It will make you easier to kill.”

But this was no longer the sour-faced man from the banquet, nor did he wear Su She’s face. Instead, this was Xue Yang with his dangerous sort of beauty, like a blighted flower, stolen from life too soon. A thin network of greens and browns covered the right side of his neck and jaw, mold infecting dead flesh. His lips were brown with rot, his eyes sunken in, and he walked with a rotation of his hips, the joints of his knees and elbows stiffened to more closely resemble the undead thing he was.

Whether Wei Ying's banishment had impacted Xue Chonghai more than they had assumed, or the constant use of the Yin Iron was wearing on him, it was clear his time in his last descendant's body was running out.

"Call that resentment back or I will not be responsible for my actions." Wei Ying played a short, experimental high note, but the resentment that spilled, smoke-like from Baoshan Sanren's mouth did not budge.

Xue Chonghai winced at the sound, but as soon as it ended, he tsked.

"I hoped to put this matter to an end while you were distracted, but I could not find the entrance to these caverns you've built into *my* refuge. That was when I realized you had dragged Baoshan Sanren off her mountain, and she was concealing the way from me. Just like she's concealed her mountain to shield her unorthodox wife from the consequences of her actions." His rotten mouth twitched. "I needed you to lead me here, yes. But how could I resist the chance for revenge against the two who broke my work yet living? Though it seems it won't take much to send poor hypocritical Lan Yi to hell. Do you think it will be the hell of knives, slashing her to bits until she's unrecognizable?"

"We will free my A-Ma from your creation yet, Xue Chonghai."

"What, five hundred years was not enough for her? For the both of them? You call me a villain, a murderer, but all of you are just as insatiable as I am. Lan Yi would not be in this position if she hadn't thought herself my superior, capable of mastering my creation beyond even my abilities. Her own arrogance was her downfall, not me. *She* chose to spend centuries waiting while her wife withered. I took my resurrection into my own hands."

Raising his hands, Xue Chonghai stepped further into the room, making way for his corrupted creations to enter.

Xue Chonghai could not have brought an army from outside the border of Yiling without alerting Wei Ying, and the townspeople had too many wards against jiangshi to make them easy targets, but the panic caused by Su Minshan's attack had left him with no shortage of victims. For similar reasons, the sort of beast he had used to kill Wei Ying's parents was not among them, and no divine beast or imitation remained in the world to bend to his command.

No, Xue Chonghai had created an army with only the resources at his disposal, the fresh bodies Yiling Wei had invited in.

They filtered through the door behind him, listless yet deadly, fierce corpses and the wildlife of the forest emerging to flank him. They were rodents, mostly, torn from their rest in various stages of decomposition, but a few larger creatures were mixed in, a leopard, a handful of monkeys, birds that shrieked and tore at flesh. A rabbit.

Lan Wangji was briefly thankful Wei Ying had not yet made good on his promise to provide Lan Wangji with rabbits.

"This is impossible. Xue Chonghai was not a young man, and this man stands before us in flesh and blood. He's delusional."

“And they’re fools for believing me?” Xue Chonghai threw back his head and laughed, the same terrible echoing laughter Lan Wangji had heard in Wei Ying’s memories channeled through another’s throat. “No, my presence here is all Wei Wuxian’s doing. *He* tore apart the portion of my soul bound to the Burial Mounds, allowing me to move more freely through the Yin Iron. *He* killed my descendant who was in possession of a piece, listening to my advice, permitting me to shape him into a near perfect vessel.”

Wei Ying scoffed, and sniped back, “If he’s near perfect, why is your skin moldering?”

Xue Chonghai waved a hand dismissively. “My descendant was a malnourished waif of a boy. His body was a convenient means to an end I’ve already achieved. Perhaps I’ll take your body instead. It would last longer. Hundreds of years, even.”

Wei Ying covered his shudder by bumping his hip into Lan Wangji’s. “What would you need with hundreds more years in a graveyard of your own making? When you run out of people to kill, it will just be you and the ghosts again, tormenting each other for eternity. It sounds boring. You should have just let me destroy you.”

“You thought you could destroy me? You, a mere infant by comparison, coming into a power I’ve had centuries to hone. Pure arrogance, and it will be your downfall. You thought you could keep my creation from me, but you failed. The new reign of Xue Chonghai has begun.” Xue Chonghai reached out his hand, and the corrupted sword vibrated violently back and forth in the slot where it had been forced into the rock. “Without the power of the Yin Iron, how can you hope to stand against me? And even if you wielded it, how could you hope to keep control? That sword is mine, and I will take it from you.”

The sword tore free of the stone, flying into its master’s grasp. He could not use it in the way of an ordinary sword, both of them too corrupted and undead for orthodox cultivation, but it was the anchor of all the Yin Iron, and increased his power exponentially.

A pair of snake-headed feelers reached for the boxes containing Yin Iron, only for the resentment that composed them to deform in multiple directions and fall apart entirely.

Xue Chonghai cursed, and before Wei Ying could move to stop him, summoned a coil of smoke that lashed out, striking into the heart of a Jiang disciple. The Jiang disciple convulsed as the smoke retreated, leaving a hole in his chest in the place of his heart.

Everyone stopped and stared as the body walked forward to join Xue Chonghai’s army, shocked to silence.

Nie Mingjue hefted his saber. “Xue Chonghai can’t even get into a box. Let’s see him try to defeat us all.”

As far as motivational speeches went, Nie Mingjue’s was simple and effective, yet far from realistic. With Baoshan Sanren out of commission for the moment, they needed to strategize how to delay Xue Chonghai. How to separate him from the Yin Iron, now that he had reclaimed his sword.

“Wait,” Wei Ying called out, but Nie Mingjue was already charging forward with Baxia held over his head, his disciples save Meng Yao on his heels. Just as he reached him, Xue Chonghai dissolved into smoke, reappearing behind one of Nie Mingjue’s disciples, introduced earlier as Zonghui, the sword already swinging toward Nie Zonghui’s neck. The fierce corpses converged around Nie Mingjue, and though they were no match for him one on one, lopping off limbs like they had the consistency of silken tofu, the corpses stopped him from coming to his disciples’ aid.

Nie Zonghui’s neck rolled off his shoulders, the blood spouting from his neck rapidly turning to black as his body lumbered toward his own sect leader. Arms grasping, but slow and uncontrolled.

Nie Mingjue hollered his grief and anger, his eyes going bloodshot as the fragile balance of his qi tilted dangerously toward deviation, but he cut his own disciple down all the same.

Meng Yao swallowed heavily, looking green around the gills, but he pulled himself up tall. “You intended those peach wood swords for Xue Chonghai, correct? To kill him?”

Lan Wangji nodded. “That’s correct.”

“Wei Wuxian should distract him, as the one he sees as the greatest threat, while the strongest among us — Zewu-jun, Hanguang-jun, Jiang-zongzhu, sneak up to stab him.”

“And me?” Jin Zixuan asked. “I know — I don’t take offense — I am less subtle than Lan-xiansheng’s lectures.”

Lan Qiren hmphed.

“*We* will help Dage with the fierce corpses,” Meng Yao said, and took the lead, diving in to take up his rightful place at Dage’s back. Together, they made quick work of their opponents. Jin Zixuan watched for a moment, bemused, before joining in.

The plan worked. Too well.

While the Jin brothers slashed their way through to Nie Mingjue’s side, and Wei Ying deflected the feelers Xue Chonghai generated from the Yin Iron back at their master, keeping them from eating anyone else’s heart, Lan Wangji tried to fade back into the background. Easier for him in his robes of Yiling Wei colors than for Xiongzhong, in pale Lan shades.

He moved along the wall, taking tiny steps so his boots did not make more than the barest whisper of sound along the floor, and with Xue Chonghai’s attention split between Wei Ying and the cultivators in battle against his creations, neither fierce corpse nor feral, undead squirrel took note of him.

Wei Ying deflected another feeler back at Xue Chonghai, but this time it split in midair into dozens of smaller looping strands, and Lan Wangji knew it was time.

Lan Wangji dashed forward and plunged a peach wood sword into Xue Chonghai's back at the same time as Xiongzhong did the same from the chest. But Xue Chonghai merely smiled with black blood dripping down his jaw, and stepped back off both blades. Mirroring each other, Lan Wangji and his brother immediately leaped back, dodging the tendrils Xue Chonghai now sent after them. He sent a barrage, forcing Lan Wangji to duck and weave and dodge and dive for as long as he held Xue Chonghai's notice.

Wei Ying lowered Chenqing slightly, panting as he tried to catch his breath in his brief respite. "How the hell are you still alive?"

"I am beyond such things as *wood*," Xue Chonghai bragged, though the hole Lan Wangji had left in his chest still gaped, even the one Xiongzhong had made sealed over like it had never been. There was something hard in the place of his heart — like he had turned it to stone, removing the possibility of stabbing him through the heart.

They would have to cut off his head to kill him. Saw it off with peach wood, or Xue Chonghai might simply reattach it. Xue Chonghai would not give them another opening so easily, but he did not know all they were capable of. All Lan Wangji was capable of.

Throwing the peach wood sword to Xiongzhong, who caught it deftly from the air, Lan Wangji switched to his guqin. He started with Clarity, putting all of his power behind it. It was not one of Lan Yi's offensive techniques, or even a song that could be directly aimed at Xue Chonghai, so long dead. It only added to the discordance of Wei Ying's high-pitched notes, but Xue Yang had died with a core intact, and if Lan Wangji was right —

Xue Chonghai stumbled, clutching his belly. The fierce corpses stumbled, shambling rather than attacking, and Nie Mingjue, the Jin brothers, and two surviving disciples took advantage of the momentary distraction to cut down as many as they could.

Jin Zixuan kicked an undead squirrel off his ankle with a look of disgust, and Meng Yao cut it in half in mid-air.

Xiongzhong threw himself toward Xue Chonghai, aiming for his neck, but too late. Xue Chonghai threw out a hand, and the resentment that burst forth sent Xiongzhong flying into the wall. The peach wood sword dropped clattered to the ground.

Lan Wangji cried out and Xiongzhong stirred, groaning, but did not climb to his feet. He would have run to him, but Xue Chonghai had centered his attention firmly on Lan Wangji. A feeler of resentment sprung forth from the Yin Iron, aiming for Lan Wangji, as a wall of it rushed toward Wei Ying, cutting him off in his path.

The snake-head turned into unnaturally long fingers as it reached him, stroking along his jaw. As Wei Ying froze in his tracks, Lan Wangji reacted instinctively, his fingers dancing across the strings of his guqin until the feeler shrieked as the Xuanwu of Slaughter had in its death throws, and vanished from his throat.

"I see now," Xue Chonghai mused to Wei Ying, though it could not be certain Wei Ying heard him over his long, sharp bursts of rage and fear masquerading as music. "You have

placed all your hopes of destroying me and my creation in this boy, and the strength of his purity. He is not just your weakness, but the key to all your ambitions.”

Xue Chonghai raised the sword, and sent it flying, straight for Lan Wangji. He tried to dodge, at least to throw himself to the ground, but a hand made of resentment grabbed his wrists and ankles, and held fast, preventing him from pulling the same trick a second time.

Lan Wangji braced himself for death, regret flashing through him for all the time he had thought he would have with Wei Ying — and his head knocked against the stone floor, leaving him stunned and blinking up at the ceiling with a ringing in his ears. There was a heaviness on his chest, and something warm and wet seeping into his robes.

Ignoring the sharp pang in his head at the motion, Lan Wangji looked down, and cried out in horror.

Shufu had pushed Lan Wangji to the ground, and the sword pierced him through the side instead.

Wei Ying was there in an instant, gingerly shifting Shufu off of Lan Wangji, shouting orders Lan Wangji could scarcely comprehend. Xiongzhong had appeared from somewhere, taking Shufu from Wei Ying onto his lap, as Wei Ying pulled Lan Wangji into his chest. Lan Wangji fought his grip, needing to get to Shufu, to help him.

“Go get Wen Qing.” Wei Ying demanded. “Now!”

Out of the corner of his eye, Lan Wangji saw Jiang Wanyin go running, Jin Zixuan at his heels.

Lan Wangji’s tears dripped down his uncle’s face, but Shufu did not move to wipe them away, nor did he speak to comfort him. Shufu’s eyes stared upward, until Xiongzhong closed them gently, for the last time. The sword still stuck out of his chest. Ink spread up his neck in branching lightning patterns, but his body did not stir.

A different sort of trap, Lan Wangji thought blearily, as he stopped fighting against Wei Ying, pushing his face into his chest where he could hide from the truth even as sobs wracked him. Shufu had died immediately. But all Xue Chonghai needed was for someone to grab the sword, unaware of its effects.

“Don’t touch that —” Wei Ying said in a sudden panic.

Lan Wangji raised his head, a hand reaching out to slap Xiongzhong’s hands away from the sword.

But it was not Xiongzhong in trouble. Nie Mingjue grabbed the dropped sword of Yin Iron with his bare hand, pulling it free.

Wei Wuxian was forced to drop his husband on the floor, and if Nie Mingjue survived this, Wei Wuxian was going to kick his ass over it.



Dark veins crept up Nie Mingjue's neck though he was still alive. He roared, clutching his chest, even as he charged blindly forward. Transformed into a puppet — and thrown into a qi deviation at the same time.

Like what had happened to Jin Zixuan all those months ago in the cave of the Xuanwu of Slaughter, but so much worse with the sword under the control of its master. So much worse that it was Nie Mingjue, with his health already unbalanced and the brute strength of his cultivation style.

“Fan out!” Meng Yao ordered the two surviving Nie disciples. “Throw anything you can get your hands on at Zongzhu, and run. Keep him moving, and keep out of his way.”

Meng Yao chucked one of his belt ornaments at Nie Mingjue's head, and when Nie Mingjue charged for him, dove between his legs, rolling in to a somersault, and kept running. The other disciples followed his lead, keeping a greater distance. Until one threw a knife that hit Nie Mingjue hilt first, and bounced off.

“Don't throw anything that can stab him, are you mad?” Meng Yao yelled.

“Sorry!” The disciple shouted back, and grabbed a handful of the calligraphy brushes Wei Wuxian used for talismans, and started hurling those one by one instead.

“So entertaining, these mortals. So determined, when you will all end up dead in the end. Even you, Wei Wuxian, with all your potential, and your pretty little husband. You will simply end up like your friends, dead and corrupted. For all your power, you're little more than a child.” For all Xue Chonghai claimed he spotted arrogance in others, it seemed to Wei Wuxian that *he* was the arrogant one. Assuming his victory was assured long before Wei Wuxian had played all the cards up his sleeve.

As Xue Chonghai continued his gloating, not in any hurry to rush their deaths with Meng Yao's show still happening, Wei Wuxian shifted his eyes — and only his eyes — to a form hovering, invisible, by his side.

Just as it had for Jin Zixun, the Yin Iron had stripped the Soul Calming Ceremony's effects from Lan Qiren.

*I never thought I would find a reason not to go to my rest and onto the next life, if presented with the opportunity. Lan Qiren said. However, my nephews are in danger, and I refuse to leave before I know they are safe. Will you help me protect them?*

“I think they should know that,” Wei Wuxian said, and at Lan Qiren's nod of agreement, handed him the resentment to make himself visible.

Lan Qiren stiffened at the influx of resentment, but scrunched his eyes shut, focusing, and flickered into something near solid.

Lan Zhan gasped, staring up at his uncle with water still in his eyes. “Shufu is still here. How — the Yin Iron.”

“He wants to stay to protect you. Both of you.” Wei Wuxian did not know how he could look at Lan Zhan after admitting to preserving his uncle from death, but when he summoned the courage, he found his husband looking at him with ears in his eyes before tuning back to his uncle.

“All I can do is respect that,” Lan Xichen said, his voice choked, yet resigned.

“Wen Qing is the only one who can help Nie-zongzhu, but you can help Shufu,” Lan Zhan said. “I want him to stay, like your shibo. Does he have to fight?”

Wen Qing *might* be able to help Nie Mingjue. But Wei Wuxian wasn’t so certain. This wasn’t the puppet infections, this was Nie Mingjue overtaken by Xue Chonghai’s sword. It had taken Wen Qing months to fully heal Jin Zixuan from a brief exposure, and the sword had rejected him almost as soon as he wrapped his hand around it. It found Nie Mingjue a much more fitting vessel.

But there was no point in bringing more grief on Lan Xichen’s shoulders now.

Wei Wuxian fed a thin line of resentment through himself, and into Lan Qiren. Lan Qiren might learn to do this himself, with time, but for now Wei Wuxian directed the trails of resentment to help him take a shape that could be perceived even by ordinary eyes. “He says he wants to.”

Lan Qiren could not speak directly to his nephews, still, but he inclined his head in confirmation.

“Give me a moment,” Wei Wuxian said. “I’ll find you an army.”

*How?* Lan Qiren asked, his thick brows furrowing.

“The same place Xue Chonghai got his,” Wei Wuxian told him. “They’re still here, and they’re angry.”

There had not been ghosts in the Burial Mounds since Wei Wuxian cleansed them, and he felt the ground tremble beneath his feet at the prospect of losing its hard-won renewal, and so soon. Many of these ghosts, in particular, should no have remained on the mortal plane. They were confused, not just because they had died suddenly, in violence, but because they had expected to move on, drinking soup to forget their life or — gods forbid — serving a term in one of the hells.

This was wrong, innately, viscerally against everything they had been taught was right. And yet because of how they had died, simply moving on was not an option.

*Do you want justice?* Wei Wuxian asked, an echo of the Yin Iron’s whispers, for a better cause.

*Yes,* they answered as one.

As Wei Wuxian lifted his hands, the ghosts rose up behind him, becoming solid and visible as Wei Wuxian fed resentment funneled from Xue Chonghai himself into them. They were

angry, angry, and yet themselves still with his aid, answering his call where they had refused to let Lan Qiren play them to rest, yet still themselves. That was all thanks to Wei Ying and his cleverness, his way of asking permission before he funneled them full of power.

“No ghost has ever been yours to control,” Wei Wuxian said. “And certainly not these ones. You took their choices from them, but not their minds, and now they want revenge.”

Lan Qiren led the seething mass of ghosts to barrel into Xue Chonghai, their hands grasping like claws, enveloping him until he was fully obscured. Wei Wuxian played, and while the ghosts did as they pleased, ripping, gouging at the skin of Xue Chonghai’s stolen body he focused on defense with his resentment. Black blood and rotten innards were exposed as the ghosts pelted Xue Chonghai with attack after attack, a wild mass howling at a pitch that made a discordant harmony with Chenqing. They were many, and Xue Chonghai was one.

And yet, one by one, the ghosts fell, torn to pieces or moving on to escape, giving up their revenge so to not lose their chance at a next life. Lan Zhan pleaded for his shufu to stop his offense, to come back to him, and Lan Qiren heard him and listened before it was too late. He broke off, and circled back to his side, taking up a defensive position before his nephews.

“This isn’t enough,” Wei Wuxian said in horrified realization. Xue Chonghai had lost all of his fierce corpses, his multitude of creatures, but the Yin Iron was all he really needed. He wielded it with an expertise far beyond Wen Ruohan, and Wei Wuxian did not have anywhere near the volume of ghosts able to come to his aid as he had at Nightless City, as he had in his very first confrontation with Xue Chonghai. Wei Wuxian had sent them to their rest himself.

But what none of them had noticed — not Wei Wuxian, not Xue Chonghai, not any of the other men — was that their efforts had bought time for one Xue Chonghai had already counted down and out.

“Maybe not, but this fight isn’t over yet,” Waipo croaked from the ground. She rubbed her throat as she used the bench to pull herself to her feet. “You will have to try harder to take me down, you ungrateful, cowardly rotten cabbage of a man.” A single streak of white had appeared in Baoshan Sanren’s hair, but her battle against the resentment was won.

She drew her sword, standing tall and at the ready — and Xue Chonghai flinched. She was a true immortal with centuries of cultivation under her belt, and even Xue Chonghai recognized her as a threat.

## Chapter End Notes

I promise LQR will still get to meet his grandkids

my parents are flying out today so next chapter tomorrow!

[Promo Tweet](#)



# Chapter 30

## Chapter Summary

Can Lan Wangi and Wei Wuxian destroy the Yin Iron before it's too late for Lan Yi?

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** minor character death (yay this time), minor character near death

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

Nie Huaisang was not a fighting man.

He was, however, very good at sneaking.

This was a skill he had honed with no greater motive than to possess specimens of the rarest, most beautiful birds in his gardens. If he had used that skill, once developed, to creep through the shadows and rafters of the Unclean Realm, eavesdropping on conversations anywhere from the reception hall to guest rooms, well that was simply self-preservation. The rafters were an excellent place to hide when Dage was in one of his force-poor-little-Huaisang-to-sweat-at-saber-practice-moods. Any information he gathered was purely circumstantial.

Nie Huaisang had not intended to organize and run a covert network of spies, and he certainly hadn't expected to be good at it. All he had ever wanted was paint, pretty birds, and porn. Unfortunately, it wasn't quite so easy to *stop* committing espionage once he knew the secrets that lay below the surface of the Cultivation World as it had been to begin.

And it wasn't as though *that* had been as easy as boiling water – which Nie Huaisang could do only with the aid of a talisman. He was, innately, a lazy man.

Something might happen to Dage, if he stopped, because Dage was far too straightforward and honorable to run one himself, and if it was only Meng Yao, Dage could ask him to disband the network, and Meng Yao would obey.

Which was precisely how Nie Huaisang had ended up doing absolutely ridiculous things like hiding in the back of a cart for days on end, and following his brother through dark, hidden tunnels with a qi-sucking demonic cultivator on the loose.

Everyone had forgotten about him in the aftermath of Su She's death, of course, even those to whom he had, unfortunately, been forced to reveal that he was more than a pretty face. That

was how he wanted it. For if no one knew there was a chance of him coming along, Xue Yang would have no clue to expect him.

No, the others had not bothered to inform him that Xue Yang was behind it all, but Nie Huaisang did not take that personally. He respected keeping the juiciest information close to the chest as future ammunition — and this would have only made the Cultivation World think the Yiling Laozu was mad.

Madder than they already did, at any rate.

Better to keep that firework of a tidbit among the inner circle. And Wei-xiong had met him all of once.

Nie Huaisang himself had only hinted at the possibility that a jiangshi was on the loose, since he hadn't been certain the first time he visited the Burial Mounds. No one who had lived to tell the tale remembered seeing the culprit. There were other possible explanations, even after Luo Qingyang told of the draining of servants at Koi Tower. Like a demonic cultivator stealing qi for rituals.

No, Nie Huaisang had figured out the identity of the jiangshi after he spotted Su She acting suspiciously as he left the banquet with a man Nie Huaisang had never seen before that night. The second man was limping visibly, and Nie Huaisang could not imagine Jin Guangshan bringing an injured man along in his bid to bring down the Yiling Laozu unless there was a reason.

Jin Guangshan was not the sharpest sword in the armory, but he also wasn't stupid, unless the prospect of power was dangled out in front of him. So perhaps this man had something to do with that glittering fool's gold Jin Guangshan was chasing.

He had followed Su She, of course, and felt the ground drop out from beneath his feet when the stranger dug his nails into his own neck, peeling away his face to reveal a very dead man underneath. Nie Huaisang had never met Xue Yang, but the description was unmistakable, down to the glove that replaced his missing pinky finger.

He tossed the false face into a shadowy corner, and they parted. Xue Yang almost hopped away once Su She turned his back. So, Nie Huaisang thought, he'd been right all along.

Nie Huaisang was not going to follow the jiangshi alone, but he scampered into the corner and procured the mask.

When he looked up, Su She was gone, and a stiff, wobbling, even more empty-eyed than usual Jin Zixun was in his place.

Could Jin Zixun have just been drunk?

Under other circumstances, certainly.

But now, Jin Zixun started shambling *toward* Nie Huaisang, and he was not ashamed to admit that he avoided the issue by climbing on the roof. Someone else would take care of Jin Zixun,

and someone else did, though he was surprised to find it was Jiang Yanli. Now there was a twist he could appreciate. Good for her, stabbing her evil future in-laws.

Maybe he *should* have followed Jin Zixun the jiangshi for the pleasure of witnessing it.

Nie Huaisang caught up with Su She after he started screaming, and promptly dropped into a faint at the sight of the body. Once other people caught up, and Jin Zixun was taken out for good, neither Su She nor anyone else took note of Meng Yao helping him search the body, where he found the second mask of what was, unmistakably Su She's face.

How would anyone ever get anything done without him?

Now here Nie Huaisang was, tailing Xue Yang into creepy dark tunnels. Nie Huaisang had seen Xue Yang walking inside along the pathway Dage had taken followed by an army of the dead and made what had to qualify as the stupidest decision of his life.

Of course, with the whole army of the dead between him — one unarmed bird watcher — and Dage, it took long enough to work his way inside without losing a limb that the army of the dead was mostly dismantled. Jin Zixun and Jiang Cheng rushed past him in the entrance, and he had learned the jiangshi was *not* in fact Xue Yang after all, but Xue Chonghai, back from the dead.

Going against him was even more futile than Nie Huaisang had imagined.

But, well, Nie Huaisang was already here. And Dage was — was —

He could not think it.

Dage was temporarily incapacitated, his unstable cultivation with a saber derived from animal spirits giving Xue Chonghai a hold over him, that was all this was. It had to be, or Nie Huaisang would find a way to split the heavens and reshape reality to bring him back.

Still, Nie Huaisang was going to tear Xue Yang apart personally for what he had done to Dage. He might be able to survive a stabbing from the twin Jades of Lan, but Nie Huaisang was not afraid to fight dirty.

When the woman Wei Wuxian called Baoshan Sanren — Nie Huaisang now felt less flummoxed by his inability to figure out the truth of the Yiling Laozu's origins, no one could have — shrouded herself in light and went after Xue Chonghai

Xue Chonghai was in possession of *two* pieces of Yin Iron, but as he watched, Nie Huaisang realized Xue Chonghai was really only drawing on one piece. The other piece kept deflecting from it, repelling to a distance of an arms length away each time the pieces neared each other, before slinging back the other way.

Could the pieces of Yin Iron only be put back together, their power merged, when all five were present? Or had splitting the Yin Iron apart made it impossible to repair? He wondered if Xue Chonghai even knew.

He could steal that piece from the other's orbit, if he timed it well, if Xue Chonghai was sufficiently distracted.

Nie Huaisang edged into the room, plastered against the wall, going entirely unnoticed in the chaos, watching for an opening, a pattern in Xue Chonghai's movements.

Sometimes, Xue Chonghai became smoke and reappeared behind Baoshan Sanren. Sometimes, he fought back, rooted in place. He was fast, filled with the qi stolen from his victims, but since it wasn't his or freely given, it was used up by the moment, but Baoshan Sanren was at home in her own body where Xue Chonghai could not be, in Xue Yang's. Nie Huaisang counted the time between each instance of Xue Chonghai vanishing into smoke, and found it was never more frequent than thirty beats of Nie Huaisang's hammering heart.

When he next reformed closer to Nie Huaisang, he eased forward. Xue Chonghai ducked to evade a slash from Baoshan Sanren, and Nie Huaisang leapt forward as the second piece of Yin Iron swung out.

Nie Huaisang flung his cloak around it, pulling it closed just in time to stop it from escaping. He dashed toward the relative safety of array and Wei Wuxian, keeping himself small and beneath the notice of the unreasonably powerful ancients throwing sword flares and snake shadows at each other between rounds of blows.

Xue Chonghai gave a growling cry when the Yin Iron Nie Huaisang had stolen did not return on its orbit, but he was forced to turn to smoke to keep his head. He was just a beat too slow, and her blade came a way coated with black blood, a line scored into his throat. Xue Chonghai parried a flurry of blows with one conjured shield of resentment after the next.

The Yin Iron jerked wildly within the cloak, trying to find an opening to flee back to its master. Nie Huaisang scrambled to tighten all the folds around it, until it was wrapped inescapably in the fabric. But as he pulled the last stray fold closed, his thumb brushed cold metal.

Nie Huaisang thought for a moment that his heart had stopped beating, that everything and everyone around him was frozen in time, frosting over into a permanent exhibit of sculptures no one would be left to see.

Then it burned, and the world came rushing back. Nie Huaisang nearly dropped the Yin Iron, but managed to seal it in his makeshift trap before it could escape.

Of course, that was when the voices started. Thousands of them, discordant and terrible, yet Nie Huaisang could understand them perfectly.

*Tell us, gongzi, what is your darkest desire?*

*That life of leisure can still be yours if you wish. It wouldn't take much. Just a yes from you, .*

*A pile of riches you can never use up, even if you live for a thousand years.*



At first, the whispers seemed laughable, made for a man like Jin Guangshan who wanted nothing more than power. But soon they became more targeted, more tempting, more difficult to ignore.

*Your Dage will bend to your every whim. No more saber practice, no more broken brushes, no more lectures, he will only praise your art as you deserve.*

No, Dage wouldn't. A Dage who didn't constantly lecture him would not be Dage. Yet the iron and its chorus of the damned spoke his doubts into being.

*It 's better for your Dage to stay by your side, no matter how. You know it in your heart.*

*How soon would you have lost him anyway? Isn't it better to have the chance to keep him? If only you dare to accept us.*

*Don 't you want revenge for stealing him away? It won't be the same if you don't do it yourself.*

*Say yes, and take our power for yourself.*

Would it really be so terrible to end this himself? To take the revenge offered to him on a silver platter? Nie Huaisang would not be a dark overlord over all of humanity, If he agreed, he could retreat with his Dage and his birds and paints and no one would dare to bother him with the affairs of the world ever again. They would be too grateful, and too frightened. He would have peace.

A hand grabbed his wrist, and Nie Huaisang stilled. He had not realized he had been shaking. There was darkness, and so he opened his eyes. Lan Wangji looked down at him, looking honestly, truly concerned.

"You just want the Iron to yourself," Nie Huaisang spat.

"Ridiculous," Lan Wangji said, and a spark shot through Nie Huaisang as he recognized the truth.

"Oh," he said shakily. He had come so very, very close to crossing a terrible boundary.

It was still oh so very tantalizing, and all he had to do was say yes.

"Nie Huaisang. We can save Chifeng-zun, but we need the Yin Iron." Lan Wangji said, and his eyes too were bloodshot, the bags around them puffy. That was right — the body on the floor was Lan Wangji's uncle. Nie Huaisang had never liked him, did not care that he was dead. But Lan Wangji was pushing through his grief, trying to save Nie Huaisang from suffering a similar loss.

*He lies*, the Yin Iron hissed through his cloak, sounding muffled now.

That was how Nie Huaisang knew it was Lan Wangji who spoke the truth.

It was only the knowledge that Dage could not survive with the Yin Iron intact that let Nie Huaisang resist the temptation.

With shaking hands, Nie Huaisang shoved the bundle at Lan Wangji, who passed it quickly off to his husband. Wei Wuxian tied the cloth closed, and pinned it into place in the array with a heavy stone that had been broken off of the table behind them in the battle. Then, he sat back down with the old woman.

There was an aching hole in Nie Huaisang's chest of regret and relief and longing, tying him inseparably to the ancient evil he had so narrowly resisted. For now.

"You had better destroy the Yin Iron and detach me and Dage from it, Lan Wangji," Nie Huaisang said, and for once, the terror in his voice was not an act, not even slightly. "Or I won't be responsible for my own actions."

Solemn and sincere, the image of everything good and pure in the world, Lan Wangji promised, "We will."

A not insignificant part of Nie Huaisang hated him for it.

Baoshan Sanren was a terror, lit up by a golden power greater than any cultivator Lan Wangji had ever known. The air around her glittered with constellations.

She had put on a show to intimidate his brother, but that was not a fraction of her power.

Lan Yi lay unconscious in Wei Ying's arms within the array, a mere wisp of herself. Like when Xue Chonghai had attacked Wei Ying and Lan Wangji saved him, Baoshan Sanren had needed the aid of the one who knew her to free herself. Now Lan Yi faded with every breath, and Baoshan Sanren fought with an intensity not seen for half a millennium in an effort to save her before time ran out. Wei Ying bought precious heartbeats with a transfer of spiritual energy he could ill afford to spare.

With Xue Chonghai's attention focused on Baoshan Sanren, Lan Xichen and Meng Yao had managed to drive Nie Mingjue toward the array. Both of them were covered in scrapes, but the scrapes looked to be due to frantic diving onto stone as they dodged the sword, and not the corruption of the sword itself, which Lan Wangji feared could kill with a scratch.

The easiest way to remove the sword from Nie Mingjue's grasp would be to cut off his hand. Lan Wangji would do it, but Xiongzhang would be upset, and they had only just reconciled. But it seemed Meng Yao had a better idea. Just as they reached the edge of the array, and Nie Mingjue instinctively flinched away, Meng Yao lunged in and bashed the hilt of his sword against Nie Mingjue's elbow.

Nie Mingjue's grip released automatically, and the sword clattered to the ground, finally back in the array where it belonged.

One more piece of Yin Iron. That was all they needed.

That wasn't enough to subdue Nie Mingjue; however, who lunged for Meng Yao's throat, only to be cut off by Xiongzhong, using his xiao as a combat weapon. "Do you have anything to," Xiongzhong grimaced. "Tie him up with?"

*Really, Xiongzhong?* Lan Wangji thought. Could they not just forget that conversation ever happened? Especially when Shufu was nearby.

But Wei Ying did have a talisman that would serve their purposes.

Lan Wangji reached into Wei Ying's sleeve, trying not to jostle Lan Yi, and retrieved a stack of talismans. He handed binding, or bonding — Wei Ying had never decided on a name — to Meng Yao. He used it on Nie Mingjue, binding him from shoulder to ankle while Xiongzhong forced Nie Mingjue's arms behind his back. Like that, Nie Mingjue could be forced to lay down within the array. He flopped in place like a shark out of water, with only the gnashing of teeth a danger if anyone got too close.

Nie Huaisang sat within the array too, rubbing his thumb where he had made contact with the Yin Iron. Giving it longing glances and fidgeting.

When Lan Wangji held up another talisman, questioning, Nie Huaisang inclined his head.

"Yes, I think that would be for the best. If you have something to knock me out, too, that would be great. Wake me up when this is over."

With great care not to touch it, they returned the sword to its proper place in the stone, and settled in to wait. Lan Wangji sat by his husband and leaned into him, needing those scant few moments of comfort before he had to pour everything he had into destroying the Yin Iron, on bringing an end to a horror born of desperation so long ago. The sweat clinging to Wei Ying's damp neck was grounding, helping him to keep from shuddering-not to think too hard about what he had already lost, and still yet might.

The duel between Xue Chonghai and Baoshan Sanren raged on, neither truly managing to gain the upper hand no matter how long and hard they fought. But Lan Yi could not hold out forever, and as her breath began to slow despite Wei Ying's continuous feeding of spiritual energy, Baoshan Sanren seemed to instinctively feel the urgency. She doubled the force behind each blow, and when Xue Chonghai vanished yet again, Baoshan Sanren leapt high, nearly brushing the ceiling, her sword pulled back on the downward arc.

He reappeared right in her path, and had just enough time for his eyes to widen before Baoshan Sanren's sword hit the final piece of Yin Iron and shattered, the pieces raining down on Xue Chonghai, blasting back onto her, burying themselves in her arms, which she used as shields for her face and neck.

The impact tore the Yin Iron free of Xue Chonghai's power. It flew through the air, landing just outside the array. It rolled on uneven sides until it came to rest perfectly in its final position. And the array began to glow from every line.

"We have to destroy it now!" Wei Ying set Lan Yi down gently, and sprang into his position, vibrating with fear and worry.

Lan Wangji saw Baoshan Sanren somersault into a landing, and bounce to her feet as he moved to take his position across from Wei Ying. She pulled a peach wood sword from her sleeve as blood dripped down her sleeves.

Xue Chonghai ran for the array, every piece of Yin Iron vibrating as he shrieked, but Lan Wangji ignored him, holding Wei Ying's hands around the sword still coated with Shufu's blood. Lan Wangji could not think of that now, or he would break down again when he could least afford it.

Baoshan Sanren and his brother would hold him off, or they would not, but only Lan Wangji and Wei Ying could destroy the Yin Iron for good.

Wei Ying's grip was tight around his hands, the spiritual energy leaking from him into the array nearly a mirror of Baoshan Sanren's. And Lan Wangji had been judged his equal. It still amazed him, no matter how many times they had proven that to be true. Wei Ying caught him staring, and offered an uneasy smile around the sword. He nodded back, unsmiling because Wei Ying always said it was distracting, and they each let go.

Lan Wangji put his hands to the strings of his guqin, closed his eyes, opening himself up to the resentment around them, to what was left of the ghosts that had attacked Xue Chonghai with Shufu, to Shufu himself.

If he worried Shufu might secretly judge him, there was no need. Lan Wangji felt only warmth from him, though he hung back, not wishing to hurt Lan Wangji as he shaped himself into something strange and different. The resentment burned as it tore those vessels in and through and out of him, a rapid imitation of the way Wei Ying had crafted himself into a passageway. The Yin Iron tried to fill him with its corrupt energy too, but Lan Wangji did not give it an opening to slip through the cracks, playing his selective welcome through the pain. He had not touched the Yin Iron, and so it had no hold on him without his permission.

There was no margin for error, no matter the anguish. And Lan Wangji had weathered this storm before.

Finally, the burning came to an end, and the resentment flowed through him with the plucking of each note. He opened his eyes, and at Wei Ying's sharp intake of breath, knew they were burning red. Wei Ying lifted Chenqing to join in with his playing, channeling only pure spiritual energy, and they sank into each other, precise opposites that slotted together perfectly.

The resentment rushed through him, mingling with Wei Ying's spiritual energy to thread together into one, weaving into the array like Wei Ying's hands on cord or yarn or rope. Creating something strong and unbreakable from their union outside the flow of time. The Yin Iron lashed out, sending up clouds of resentment within the array, trying to save itself, to reach its master, anyone it could corrupt, but it found no flaw, no hole, no foothold in their defenses. Wei Ying's playing swept the resentment away from their faces, saving them both from breathing it in.

They played on and on until Lan Wangji saw the universe spool out in Wei Ying's eyes, and the golden darkness of the array's power rose to form a dome over his head.

It was an eternity and no time at all before the Yin Iron began to fail.

Black specks fell from the hilt of the sword. Just enough, at first, to look like a layer of dust removed. But more poured off soon after, until the hilt fell away entirely, and the blade, little by little, collapsed to the ground. On the points around the array, all that remained of the Yin Iron was piles of dust.

It was an end and a beginning, those inevitable things bound up in the music they created together. An infinity of things could have gone differently along the way. In every life the universe could have given him, Lan Wangji would have found Wei Ying and fallen for him. Another inevitable everything. But in this life, they were here, and they had won, and they had lost, and it was finally time to move onto the next chapter of their lives.

Slowly, their fingers stilled, and Lan Wangji stared at Wei Ying, breathing hard. Wei Ying was the first to move, running to Lan Yi, but Lan Wangji was more cautious. He looked to see what had become of Xue Chonghai, needing to know that he would never hurt any of them, especially Wei Ying, ever again.

Xue Chonghai was still on his feet, but he had been left without his source of power. Nothing more than an ordinary jiangshi, his limbs stiffening until he was forced to hop to move, his arms stuck out before him. He hopped, frantically, for the door, but even he knew he would never make it.

Baoshan Sanren beat him there, and struck hard with her peach wood sword, spearing him through the heart.

This time, it took.

With his newfound power, Lan Wangji could see the last remnants of Xue Chonghai's soul dissipating in the air. All that had been holding Xue Yang's body together was Xue Chonghai's possession, and it sloughed apart into a rotten puddle of flesh on the floor.

Baoshan Sanren stood there with dried blood on her arms, her wounds having healed around the shrapnel of her sword where they would need to be surgically removed later, looking down at the scant remains of an enemy that had once been her student. And she turned her back and ran to her wife.

Xiongzhong was all right, if a little roughed up, and already fussing over a Nie Mingjue now lying still, Nie Huaisang threw himself at his brother the moment the binding talisman was released with the fading light of the array, reaching him only a moments after Lan Xichen and Meng Yao.

Lan Wangji went to support his husband.

Lan Yi was breathing, if shallowly, Lan Wangji could tell that much. Wei Ying could not possibly have the spiritual energy left to help her. He was stronger than Lan Wangji, still, but after all he had poured into her earlier and all he had poured into the array, he was swaying, running on empty. Though Lan Wangji was lightheaded himself, he reached Wei Ying just in time to catch him before he could hit his head against the stone.

He caught Wei Ying's elbows as he struggled to reach for Lan Yi again. "No, I have to, Lan Zhan, I —"

Then Baoshan Sanren was there, taking Lan Yi into her arms, the golden light that suffused her seeping into Lan Yi's skin. Wei Ying went still in his arms, and Lan Wangji could feel the coiled tension under his hands, so he held tight, pulling Wei Ying back to rest against his chest.

"She isn't going anywhere," Baoshan Sanren said, but her vehemence sounded more like a prayer than a promise.

Back in the burn out array, Nie Mingjue groaned, trying to sit up. Xiongzhang had to pin his arms down to stop him from trying to rise. He started thrashing again, even without the resentment's influence, and roared at the ceiling.

Of the three people who had been connected to the Yin Iron, only Nie Huaisang seemed entirely recovered, whispering nonsense to his brother, contradictory promises of good behavior if he woke as himself and threats against him if he didn't.

The sound of boots skidding against stone came from the door as Wen Qing finally ran inside on the heels of Jiang Cheng and Jin Zixuan, Mianmian on her heels.

"Help! Please," Nie Huaisang begged, and Wen Qing glanced at Baoshan Sanren with uncertainty. At Baoshan Sanren's nod, she went to Nie Mingjue first. Wei Ying shook with impatience, terror, anger, maybe all three mixed together, but bit his tongue and turned his face into Lan Wangji's shoulder, reaching up to hold onto Lan Wangji's arms with everything he had.

"He doesn't know who I am," Meng Yao said, shattered, as Wen Qing took Nie Mingjue's pulse, keeping his arm in place with Mianmian's help despite his struggling.

"Who any of us are," Xiongzhang said. "Look, he's speaking into the air, not to Huaisang."

Speaking was an overstatement for growls and cursing in Nie Huaisang's general direction, which Nie Huaisang took with a gray, nauseous expression and more pleas for his dage to come back to himself.

"He's still qi deviating," Wen Qing explained, inserting needle after needle in quick succession. "He'll be stable like this, for a while."

"You won't help him now?" Nie Huaisang yelled. "Then what are you good for?"

"Keeping him alive," she snapped, already moving to kneel by Lan Yi. "I have more than one patient. Go find Jiang Yanli and my students if you can't wait for me to stabilize *my best friend's grandmother*. They can tend to your scrapes and bruises, at least."

"I'll go," Jin Zixuan volunteered and ran back out the door, without waiting for anyone to confirm that he should.

Wen Qing's lips thinned as she took Lan Yi's pulse. "Don't stop sharing your spiritual energy with her," she told Baoshan Sanren, who would not have stopped if Wen Qing told her to. "The Yin Iron was connected to her for so long, so entwined with the piece of her soul that kept watch over it, that the piece did not attach properly when it returned. Her immortal core is unraveling as a result. I can repair the damage, but I need no interference."

Baoshan Sanren took the news almost stoically. With tears in her eyes, Baoshan Sanren bent down to kiss her wife's lips, and pressed their foreheads gently together. Then she sat back, her mouth set in a severe line and let Wen Qing get to work.

As the first of Wen Qing's needles sank into skin, Wei Ying made a quiet whimpering noise in his throat. Lan Wangji squeezed him around the chest, reminding him he was not alone. Everything to come, they would face together.

After a moment, Wei Ying moved fully onto his lap and Lan Wangji leaned back against the workbench, settling in to wait. Wei Ying had eyes for nothing but Wen Qing's hands, crafting a miracle in his grandmother's abdomen.

Shufu hovered uncertain off to the side, until he saw Lan Wangji looking.

*This is not your fault,* he said.

Lan Wangji nodded in agreement, and they both startled at the realization that Lan Wangji could hear him. Could see him, all on his own. Shufu was translucent, the colors of his robes and hair and face dimmed and gray. But for however long this lasted, Lan Wangji would be grateful.

"I am glad you're still here," he said aloud to Shufu, stopping short of asking him to stay. Lan Wangji had a feeling he would, anyway.

It would not stop the grief of losing him, not entirely. Someday, Shufu would move on, but Lan Wangji would be grateful for any extra time he had with him.

Xue Chonghai was gone, and he had left a disaster in his wake. All of that could wait for Lan Wangji to sit a while with friends and family, leaning his head on his husbands' shoulder. Xiongzhong hovering over Nie Mingjue, Wen Qing working over Lan Yi, her hands a flurry of motion, Mianmian handing her tools, Baoshan Sanren presiding over it all.

Lan Wangji and Wei Ying, shoring each other up against the world, letting their victory and all that came with it slowly settle in.

And at the end of it all, Lan Yi stirred, and opened her eyes.

## Chapter End Notes

And that's almost a wrap! Just an epilogue I hope you'll find satisfying to go

[Twitter Promo](#)



# Chapter 31

## Chapter Summary

Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi celebrate their 500th Wedding Anniversary, and Lan Wangji thinks about the future

## Chapter Notes

**CW:** first scene is smut (blow job with references to past impact play). If you'd like to skip that, jump to "They were just putting away," mention of an elderly, undead character thinking about moving on

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

The sun rose, the cock crowed, and the birds finished their morning song while Lan Wangji watched his husband sleeping. Wei Ying's mouth was open, his head bent toward his outstretched arm. He had escaped the covers entirely, and thrown a leg over Lan Wangji's waist to rest against the swell of his ass. Lan Wangji had slept on his stomach, his ass sore and bruised in stripes left behind by their game the night before. Every time Wei Ying shifted in his sleep, his leg rubbed against the bruises, letting him relive how wonderfully their newest toy had stung.

A year ago Lan Wangji had thought himself happy simply to stay by Wei Ying's side, lucky to be the one Wei Ying was trapped in a marriage with. He could not have imagined how deliriously happy Wei Ying would make him.

Reaching behind himself, Lan Wangji nudged Wei Ying's leg off of him, and moved so he lay between Wei Ying's legs, putting his weight on Wei Ying's chest. Wei Ying did not stir; they fell asleep like this often enough. Lan Wangji placed a gentle kiss against the base of Wei Ying's neck. He was tempted to bite, though there was too much to do that day for a repeat performance of last night.

Lan Wangji was catching up with Wei Ying, his core growing until he healed almost more quickly than he would have liked, in some circumstances. But then, that meant he would be ready for a repeat experience that much sooner.

Moving a short distance down, he kissed Wei Ying again, and again, as he trailed his way down to the dark patch of hair around Wei Ying's cock, already half-hard with morning wood and responding to every touch of Lan Wangji's lips. It was when Lan Wangji reached the

most sensitive part of his abdomen, below his belly button, just above where the tip of his cock rested that Wei Yin stirred.

His lips came away damp. Wei Ying was already leaking.

“Good morning to my beautiful husband.” Wei Ying’s eyelids finally fluttered open, and Lan Wangji chose that moment to take Wei Ying in his mouth. “Oh, and an even better morning for me.”

Lan Wangji did not bother with artfulness, only taking Wei Ying deeper with every bob of his head until the tip hit the back of his head. Wei Ying thrust up into his mouth and Lan Wangji’s hips jerked uncontrollably into the bed below. He felt so needy, burning with desire for more even as tears leaked from his eyes.

“You’re humping the sheets so desperately, Zhanzhan. How long have you been awake, watching me and —” Wei Ying broke off in a long, broken moan, but continued right where he had left off “—thinking about sucking my cock? Are you going to come from my cock in your throat?”

Lan Wangji moaned around him. The answer was yes, probably, his mouth was so satisfyingly full, his cock aching from sitting there, watching his husband until it was late enough to wake him. He would come if Wei Ying only said the word.

“I think I’ll let you. You took me — ah — so well last night.” Wei Ying buried his hands in Lan Wangji’s hair, tugging just hard enough to sting. And it was almost — almost — enough. The sound he made was somewhere between a sigh and a groan, causing vibrations around Wei Ying’s cock.

Wei Ying threw back his head, fucking his mouth wildly, his grip on Lan Wangji’s hair turning painful, and Lan Wangji was coming hard before the first spurt of cum coated his throat. He did not manage to swallow everything, too swept away by the force of his orgasm, but when it was over, he sank back down around Wei Ying and looked up from beneath his lashes.

“There’s my good boy,” Wei Ying crooned, amused and loving, carding his hands through tangled hair. A shock went through Lan Wangji at the praise, his cock twitching, not with the valiance of the spent, but insisting that it would rather like to go again. “What did I do to deserve this kind of a wake up? Not that I’m complaining.”

Lan Wangji hummed, and Wei Ying laughed. “Lan Zhan! Come up here and let me kiss you!”

With some reluctance, Lan Wangji let Wei Ying’s cock slip out of his mouth and crawled up his body to kiss him, both of their horrible morning breath, dick breath, and all.

“How soon do we have to get up?” Wei Ying asked when they parted.

Lan Wangji let his forehead drop against Wei Ying’s. “That depends when the kids decide to grace us with their presence.”

“If A-Yuan is up with the sun, I’m blaming you.” Wei Ying reached up to push the curtain of Lan Wangji’s hair behind his ear. “He wants to be just like his diedie, but I’m not giving up without a fight! He can be like you in every respect except the early mornings. I refuse.”

“If he starts asking for us with the dawn, I will handle it,” Lan Wangji promised.

Wei Ying’s thumb stroked against his cheek. “Of course you will. You’re a wonderful father, and a diligent husband. And you want me to have energy left for you.”

Wei Ying was not wrong in his assessment. Or in the way he reached between them, stroking Lan Wangji’s flagging cock back to hardness, taking care of him with the utmost gentleness though Lan Wangji felt the sting of his bruises with every shift against the sheets.

They were just putting away a wet cloth and a basin of water when the front door of their rooms made an ear-splitting warbling sound, and the shrieking voices of the reasons they had installed the annoying talisman could be heard from outside:

A-Xi and A-Yuan’s rooms were just next door, and they were *trying* to teach them the virtues of knocking, but kids would be kids, as Wei Ying said, and they had added an alert and talisman-based lock to the door. A privacy screen too big for the kids to move also lay between the door and their bed. A double layer of insurance so that while the children could always reach them if needed, they would never witness anything inappropriate.

Lan Wangji was out of bed and dressed before the kids had a chance to do more than whine “Diedieeeeeeeee,” with Wei Ying only slightly behind. The moment the door was opened, the kids barreled inside, chattering excitedly about the day to come.

“A-Die, can we go into town now? Please please please! You promised we could, and everyone *must* be there already without me,” A-Xi said at a pace almost too fast for Lan Wangji to follow.

At eight years old, A-Xi was already growing tall developing muscles from practice with a wooden sword along with her core, but there was a brush forgotten behind her ear. Her calligraphy was legible but lazy, though she excelled at talisman work. Just like someone else Lan Wangji knew.

“How are you kids so energetic this early in the morning, huh?” Wei Ying asked. He purposefully dragged his feet as he made his way around the screen, his head hanging down, pretending to still be half asleep despite being obviously dressed for the day. “Good little bunnies should still be in bed.”

“Come onnnn, Diedie. We’ve been *waiting* for *so long*. Ages!” A-Xi whined.

It could not have been more than half a ke since the children first knocked.

“Okay,” Wei Ying conceded, but held up a finger to cut off their celebratory cheer. “*If* you let your A-Die pull your hair back first. He has something special for you just for the occasion.”

Both perked up at the promise of a gift. It was really from both of them, but Lan Wangji was better at putting their hair up so it wouldn't be a tangled mess by day's end. It was also a lesson in patience, and waiting their turn.

Lan Wangji tied red ribbons into the hair of both children, interwoven into braids and dangling down her back for A-Xi, and around twin buns for little A-Yuan. Onto the ends of the ribbons, he tied Wei Ying's tiniest knots, each containing a coin inscribed with a protective talisman. A-Xi fidgeted the entire time Lan Wangji's hands were in her hair, while A-Yuan sat mostly still, but almost tore his own hair out by suddenly jerking forward when he thought he saw a butterfly flitting by out the window.

Then they were ready, and it was off to a day full of festivities.

At least Lan Wangji had Wei Ying's steadying presence to sustain him through all the social interactions the day would require of him.

The five hundredth wedding anniversary of Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi was celebrated with appropriate pomp and circumstance in Yiling as well as on the mountain, with festivities the likes of which few of the attendees would ever see again. For the people of Yiling, this was an event that happened once in ten lifetimes. Even most of the cultivators attending would reach only a century or two.

It was a momentous occasion for another reason, too. Through slow, meticulous work, Wei Ying and Baoshan Sanren had persuaded the tree with deep roots along the trunk, forming an oval. The woods on the other side could be seen through the oval now, but later it would fill with a kaleidoscope of colors like mother of pearl.

From then on, the gate between Baoshan Sanren's mountain and the Burial Mounds would be permanent. No one would be unable to live in both worlds if they chose. It would still be a secret of sorts. Baoshan Sanren's sanctuary was a necessity in a world with so little peace to speak of, and the magic she had pushed into it would keep it safe from discovery by those who did not already know of its existence.

It would mean *everything* for Xiao Xingchen, allow Baoshan Sanren's other disciples to visit the world without worrying about being locked out, let Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi keep in touch with their great-grandchildren and beyond. This off all days was a fitting one to open the portal.

Lan Wangji and Wei Ying took the children down to Yiling first, hoping to tire them out before the more formal ceremonies scheduled for the afternoon. Lan Yi had refused to schedule anything before the sun reached its apex. It was their five hundredth anniversary after all, and her health was finally improving.

On the way out of the Burial Mounds, they passed the rabbit pen, where most of the rabbits were sleeping, but one was out in the pen digging a hole in the dirt. The hutch was surrounded by a ward to keep out foxes and other predators, and keep the rabbits from

escaping into the gardens — still under construction — so the rabbits had free rein of a wide space without Lan Wangji having to worry.

Both the rabbits and the hutch had been a birthday surprise from Wei Ying, keeping his promise that his only secrets . They had ten rabbits so far, most of them from the mountain with coats of black and brown and gray, but Wei Ying had asked Xiongzhong for permission, and taken two rabbits that had once been companions to Lan Yi in the Cold Pond Cave back to the Burial Mounds. A-Yuan could be found in their pen even more often than Lan Wangji, who — alas — had responsibilities, and could not cuddle soft fluffy animals while escaping his reading tutor every day.

Yiling had brought out all of its festival decorations, games for children, and set up a rope swing that had a line that went down an entire street and wrapped around the corner. The old, undead carpenter had carved a wooden screen depicting different images from Baoshan Sanren and Lan Yi's romance, from their meeting on a night hunt to their stand off over the Yin Iron to Lan Yi waking up in Baoshan Sanren's arms only a few months previous. It would stand inside a small building to be built around the entrance of the new portal, but for now it was the centerpiece of the town square.

There was a troupe of dancers Wei Ying had hired in the square, and later traveling performers would put on a play. Elsewhere in the town, locals played music together, gorged themselves on food and freely flowing wine, and gambled over an impromptu race between turtles that had escaped, still living, from the market. A-Xi ran ahead, excited to find her friends for the festivities, while A-Yuan hung back, holding tight to both their hands.

A-Xi, who had started cultivating her core while still living on the Mountain, was ahead of the rest of the young disciples they had recently taken in, including the children of townspeople who walked up to the Burial Mounds for class, and the handful of orphans they had found with potential to form a golden core. She was precocious, but thankfully a sort of funny her peers found hilarious that entirely mystified every adult around. A-Xi would not grow up like Lan Wangji, holding himself aloof and — not unhappy, but fooling himself into believing all he needed was his brother, the rules, and his sword.

Neither of his children would grow up without knowing they were loved by many, and especially by their parents, both living and dead. They would have not just the things they needed, but what they wanted within reason.

That was why they were coming into town today, because A-Xi had asked. She wanted to spend part of the celebrations with her friends, and her fathers were happy to oblige.

The little Wen girl who wanted to be a doctor, brought from Qishan all those months ago, sat on the steps of the clinic in town, practicing her stitches. She was not learning medicine just yet, still developing her core along with the rest of the young disciples, but she was a promising student.

A-Xi bounced up to her, talking five li a minute, until the girl set her work aside, and took A-Xi's hand. They ran off toward the festival games, forcing Lan Wangji to pick A-Yuan up so he and Wei Ying could keep up. The girls joined a group of kids playing their own made-up

version of jianzi, trying to kick the little feathered shuttlecocks into targets marked with wooden hoops.

With A-Xi finally staying put, they began to catch up with A-Yuan. Before they could find a comfortable place to sit and watch, though, A-Yuan looked up at Lan Wangji and jerked his chin toward a candy stall. It sold sugar hardened and shaped into animals, as well as brightly colored candied fruits, among others. A-Yuan's eyes were very large and sad.

"Lan Zhan," Wei Ying started to protest. "He's going to want dessert later — why do I bother."

Lan Wangji had already bought A-Yuan a soft brown sugar candy. At five, A-Yuan was just old enough to eat hard candies, but he still preferred those that could melt in his mouth. Lan Wangji liked to indulge him. Wei Ying called it spoiling, but Lan Wangji just liked to see his son smile.

The stall owner handed back the silver Lan Wangji had paid with, along with a rabbit-shaped hard candy on a stick. He or Wei Ying tried to pay, the townspeople wouldn't accept it, and the cycle went round. Perhaps the next generation or the one after that would see things differently. Wei Ying would be relieved on the day that happened. But for now, with the town so prosperous it was difficult to make an argument against the people's generosity, it was an in-joke between them and the townspeople.

Lan Wangji found he liked in-jokes much more when he was not perpetually on the outside of them.

They settled in to watch A-Xi play while A-Yuan sucked on his candy, and Lan Wangji slowly savored his own. They were approached by a number of townspeople who asked how young Wei-gongzi was enjoying his first holiday in Yiling — they had spent the new year on the mountain, and then paid a visit to his brother — and A-Yuan charmed them all, bouncing as he said that he was enjoying himself, thank you, and asked what song the pipa player down the street was playing.

Another group of kids ran by, chasing a giggling kid dressed in all black with smudges of mud on his cheeks.

"Come back here, Xue Chonghai!" A girl dressed as Nie Mingjue shouted.

The kid dressed as Wei Ying threw a crumpled piece of paper after 'Xue Chonghai.' "It's over! We've destroyed your evil tool!"

Catching up, the kids dressed as Lan Wangji — with a makeshift forehead ribbon — and Baoshan Sanren tackled the one playing Xue Chonghai to the ground, and when they rolled off, he made a show of a prolonged death rattle to the delighted laughter of his friends, and Wei Ying.

"Ah, if only it had been that easy — where's A-Yuan?" Wei Ying's joking tone turned to panic mid-sentence.

He had been sitting between them, but when Lan Wangji looked down, A-Yuan was not there. He hadn't gone over to his sister to play games, or followed the other children. He hadn't gone back to the candy stall to weasel his way into another piece. In a panic, Lan Wangji stood, and turned around, scanning the stalls lining the street until he reached a stall selling knit puppets of all shapes and sizes. Dragons and lions and creatures of the forest in bright colors to appeal to the eyes of children.

A-Yuan was there.

A-Yuan was holding a butterfly puppet as tall as he was.

Wei Ying pinched the bridge of his nose.

Lan Wangji sighed. "Shufu, please do not spoil them so much."

The townspeople had been asked not to give A-Yuan anything that caught his eye without an adult present — and paying, but they ignored that part — so that he would not think he could simply walk up to a stall in a different town and take anything he wanted. The townspeople had mostly listened. Mostly.

Shufu stepped through the wall of the shop behind the stall, his hands clasped behind his back and his head held tall. So far, Shufu had proven immune to all pleas not to "buy" — have A-Yuan tell the shopkeeper his ghost uncle said it was okay using Inquiry, at which A-Yuan was a very quick study despite only just having started playing the guqin — anything his grandchildren set their eyes on. *As their only granduncle, it is my duty to give those kids whatever they wish.*

Where he had been a strict uncle, he was an indulgent granduncle.

"Shufu," Lan Wangji said.

Wei Ying rolled his eyes. "As if Lan Zhan doesn't cave whenever A-Yuan sticks out his lower lip. But he is correct. We only buy A-Yuan toys if he's going to use them, and I'm not so sure about this one. A-Yuan, are you *really* going to use that puppet?"

A-Yuan chewed on his lip as he thought about it and finally nodded. "I'm gonna put on plays with the bunnies! If — can I keep it?"

Exchanging a glance with Wei Ying found they were in agreement. "Despite your ghost uncle's actions, yes, you may."

A-Yuan crowed and started running in circles with it, the ribbons attached to the butterfly's wings trailing after him.

"And next time don't listen to your ghost uncle!" Wei Ying called, only for A-Yuan to ignore him.

Plucking the slightest bit of resentment from the air, Lan Wangji channeled it through to Shufu. Only a handful of out-of-town visitors flinched as the resentment came into view first, then seemed to shape itself into an imposing man with a sharp goatee.

Wei Ying took in his changed eyes and leered, whistling appreciatively. Which should not have made Lan Wangji's ears heat. They were *married*. But Lan Wangji suspected he would never truly get used to Wei Ying's flirting, as Wei Ying would never truly get used to his compliments. He hoped they would still surprise each other in little ways a thousand years down the line.

"Did you change your mind about the celebration today?" Lan Wangji asked his uncle. "I know Xiongzhang is not..." he trailed off. But how could he say allowed that his brother was not receptive to visits from their uncle?

Shufu shook his head. *Xichen will get used to it. This is a big adjustment for him, about both of us.*

That Lan Wangji had not used resentment once, as necessary to destroy the Yin Iron, and never again, was also a point of contention.

Lan Wangji could not foresee himself channeling resentment casually, as Wei Ying did, but if there was one benefit of the technique he had adopted to destroy the Yin Iron, it was that he could talk to his uncle without the aid of inquiry, and see him without Wei Ying helping him become visible.

It was complicated with Xiongzhang, who could not see Shufu without aid from Lan Wangji or Wei Ying. Could not speak to him at all without inquiry or interpretation. Could not feel as Lan Wangji could that this was Shufu in his entirety and not some pale shadow.

Lan Wangji understood why it was difficult for Xiongzhang to believe. The Shufu that they had both known all their lives would have seen continuing his existence as a ghost to be selfish, painful to the living, dangerous at worst. He would have insisted on his own immediate liberation. That Shufu had never seen his younger nephew marry a demonic cultivator and become one himself, surprising him with support against the odds with every step. That Shufu had never heard his younger nephew ask him to stay.

Lan Wangji had asked a parent to stay once before. His mother had been gone before she had a chance to hear him asking. She had died with her soul-calming ceremony intact, and the answers Lan Wangji wanted died with her — most of them, at least. He did not blame her, she never had a choice from the moment her sword stabbed into the heart of his father's teacher. Shufu believed she had a reason, but he never learned it. Shufu heard him asking, and he chose to stay.

If his reasons for saying had something to do with his aspirations for grandchildren, Lan Wangji did not mind. His children were adorable.

And Xiongzhang was trying, with Wei Ying. He was not cutting Lan Wangji out, and had not banned Shufu from visiting or outright attempted to liberate him. He, too, sent too many gifts for the children, but concealed them by sending enough of the same item for every child in Yiling under the age of ten. Their relationship was better, and Lan Wangji had faith that someday it would be *good*.



A-Yuan ran around with his puppet for a while, but it didn't take him long to tire, trudging back to wrap his arms around one of each of his fathers' thighs at once, sticking his little face between them and snuffling like a bunny. Lan Wangji caught the butterfly puppet before it could fall.

Wei Ying patted A-Yuan on the head. "Aiya, so tuckered out already. Are you going to sleep through your great-grandmothers' big day?"

A-Yuan shook his head without looking up, tightening his death grip on their legs.

"Would it help if Diedie carries you?" Wei Ying asked.

A-Yuan nodded and let go, lifting his arms up, wearing a pout Wei Ying insisted he got from Lan Wangji, but that Lan Wangji was certain he got from Wei Ying.

"All right, then up you go." Wei Ying groaned dramatically as he lifted A-Yuan onto his hip. "You're going to be too big for this soon. What'll you do then, huh?"

A-Yuan snuggled into his shoulder, making sleepy sounds of protest.

*Look at our baby*, Wei Ying mouthed over A-Yuan's head, and Lan Wangji smiled, watching them both.

*You have done well*, Shufu said, resting his intangible hand on Lan Wangji's shoulder. They had never been physically affectionate with each other, and now could not be, but it meant so much that Shufu was trying. That Shufu was giving holding him up, rather than holding him to impossible standards.

"A-Xi, we should head out!" Wei Ying called.

A-Xi kicked her shuttlecock into a hoop. "Already? But we just got here!"

It had been at least a Shichen.

"Say your goodbyes to your friends and your ghost uncle," Wei Ying told her. "You'll see them all soon, but your great-grandmothers' party is special."

A-Xi perked up at the reminder that they were leaving one celebration to attend another. "Okay!"

Parting from Shufu, they headed back up to the Burials Mounds with A-Yuan nodding off on Wei Ying's shoulder. A-Xi chattered about her best trick shots and how many points she had scored all the way up.

By the entrance to the banquet hall, the tunnel drilling equipment sat still and unattended for the occasion. Wen Ning was carving more tunnels into the mounds, including several intended for escape, just in case, and he was working on making the lighting more hospitable.

He was even making windows in outer chambers. Making a palace within the mounds rather than building out and cutting down the still-recovering forest.

Wen Ning himself was down in Yiling, running wild with the other disciples his age. He had offered to go to the Mountain with the rest of them, but Wen Qing told him to go enjoy himself. With the portal to be opened, Wen Ning could go visit his relatives any day, when they would have no distractions from pinching his cheeks and asking which of his sect siblings he had a crush on. If Wen Ning was interested in anyone at all, Lan Wangji suspected the answer was both petite, fierce An Yulun, and Gao Luxian, even more tall and broad than Wen Ning himself, at the same time. He could not say for certain.

The courtyard was mostly empty, with all the disciples taking advantage of the festivities. But Wen Qing sat inside her clinic with the door open to the spring breeze, pouring a vibrant red mixture into a jar. A patient was there with her, an older woman who accepted the jar with a bowed head when Wen Qing handed it to her.

“Take this for nausea, and you should feel better in a week.”

The patient bowed over their hands as she accepted her medicine. “Thank you, Wen Daifu, I’m sorry to disturb you today, of all days.”

“Better to catch it now than later, and my students are still learning,” Wen Qing said. “I’m glad they asked for help, when they weren’t certain what was wrong.”

“Can I have my betrothed back now?” Mianmian did not wait for an answer before taking Wen Qing into her arms from behind, pressing a kiss to her temple, and when Wen Qing turned her head, to her lips.

Wen Qing’s patient chuckled, and turned to go, plodding away quickly with her walking stick before Wen Qing resurfaced. She nodded in greeting when she passed Lan Wangji, Wei Ying, and their children.

Though Mianmian had joined the sect officially, after she married Wen Qing, she walked the world on her own terms, from going where she pleased to choosing robes with nothing to do with sect allegiance.

Mianmian had just returned from a night hunt yesterday afternoon, on which An Yulun and Gao Luxian had been the only disciples selected to accompany her. He hadn’t expected her to let Wen Qing out of bed before noon, but the patient explained that.

It would take quite a bit to impress Wen Qing enough to hand more serious patients over to one of her students. But she was slowly learning to take on less at once, with Mianmian’s encouragement, and the necessity of travel to help Nie Mingjue through his recovery.

Her greatest struggle with each visit was convincing Nie Mingjue that he still could not use his saber if he wanted to see forty. Meng Yao and when he could, Xiongzhong, did their best to persuade him, and Nie Huaisang had locked Baxia away where it could not tempt him. So far, the most effective means of keeping Nie Mingjue from doing himself in had proved to be

learning blacksmithing in the sect smithy, where according to Nie Huaisang's last letter, he was working on a "surprise" bird perch for the gardens.

Nie Huaisang himself was pleased that his brother was doing better, spending more time with him — and was no longer attempting to force Nie Huaisang to practice his saber, now that he had seen the eventual consequences firsthand.

"No more work today," Mianmian said against Wen Qing's neck, and her voice was teasing, not the frustration it would have been months ago. "You're all mine."

"You're sweeping me away from all my work, what choice do I have?" Wen Qing kissed her again, lingering, still not noticing their presence.

"A-Die," A-Xi piped up, her little voice carrying. "Why do grown ups kiss so much?"

Mianmian and Wen Qing broke apart. Wen Qing resigned to the box of worms the question opened up, Mianmian giggling. "Yeah, Qing-jie, why do we adults kiss so much? Tell us the medical explanation."

Wen Qing looked about as excited about answering that question as Lan Wangji felt. He wanted to have that conversation when he and Wei Ying had planned out what to say, not come up with an explanation on the spot. It was approaching the time when they *should* start discussing some topics with A-Xi, and sending her to Wen Qing for others. But couldn't they return to the topic in a few days?

Thankfully, Wei Ying rescued them both, whispering to avoid waking A-Yuan from his nap. "Don't you know? It's a prank all adults play on every child. That's why it's so fun!"

A-Xi rolled her eyes. "Diedie, I'm not *five*."

"You're *not*?" Wei Ying gasped dramatically. "Where did my baby go?"

"*Diedie*," A-Xi complained, her outrage causing her to forget her question. But whatever scolding of Wei Ying she might have launched into was rudely interrupted.

"Is this where we meet for the mysterious ceremony?" A familiar voice said from behind them, and in a flash of mint green, Mianmian raced across the courtyard to tackle Jin Zixuan to the ground.

"You made it!" Mianmian climbed off of Jin Zixuan, dusted herself off, and offered him a hand to help him to his feet.

"Just in time to be attacked for my efforts it seems. It's good to see everyone. *Except* Mianmian."

Mianmian very maturely stuck her tongue out at Jin Zixuan.

Jin Zixuan was in finery of a vivid purple, now dusty from his tumble in the dirt, for he now lived entirely at Lotus Pier, save for the times he came to visit Lan Wangji and Mianmian when he sensed Jiang Wanyin was growing too enraged with his presence for harmony.

Despite attempts by his mother to get him to change his mind, Jin Zixuan had held strong in his determination to let Lanling Jin fracture or die out without his interference. And fracture it had, with some of the extended family and strongest disciples branching off to found their own sects already. Jiang Wanyin had already written to Wei Ying in a panic that his sister's terrifying mother-in-law might be moving in. But on the bright side, with Jin Zixuan marrying in, Jiang Wanyin did not have to worry about producing an heir himself.

When Jin Zixuan had recently discovered another half-sibling after the boy's aunt wrote a letter asking if there was still a future for him in Lanling Jin, Jin Zixuan had brought him to Yiling rather than Yunmeng. Not because Jin Zixuan didn't want him near, but because the sect with the eccentric sect leader was a better fit for him than the one who shouted his anger and affection in equal measure.

Lan Wangji nodded, acknowledging that it was good to see Jin Zixuan too.

"It's good to see me?" Wei Ying hitched A-Yuan up on his hip, putting his free hand over his heart. "I'm honored."

"Don't make me regret saying that," Jin Zixuan warned.

Wei Ying's grin threatened that he absolutely would make him regret it before the day was done.

The mourning period ends soon, doesn't it?" Mianmian asked. "Have you set a date for the wedding?"

"We have an appointment with a fortune teller in a few days, finally. Though my future brother-in-law will try to push it off as long as he can." Jin Zixuan scrunched up his nose as if at a distasteful memory. "He sends his regards, by the way, along with a whole ramble about this-squabble between several local lotus farmers regarding property boundaries. Yanli is... honestly doing most of the negotiating. I have no idea how that man would have managed without her."

"So it's a good thing you have no ambition and moved in with your wife's family," Mianmian teased.

To Lan Wangji's surprise, Jin Zixuan merely smiled at the joke. "To my mother's eternal disappointment, and my betrothed's great appreciation."

Mianmian groaned and shoved him in the shoulder.

The small group of them stood before the tree with deep roots, standing on the edge of history. Lan Wangji held A-Xi's hand as Wei Ying stepped up to the split trunk with Mianmian, Wen Qing, and Jin Zixuan arrayed behind them. A-Yuan still slept with his arms around Wei Ying's neck. The five who had left Baoshan Sanren's mountain a year ago, returning with two new additions.

Wei Ying pressed his token to the tree with deep roots for the last time, and when he drew his hand away, it was embedded in the wood. Light burst within the confines of the hole, like lighting striking across it without burning. Then from the edges, the light began to expand, first silver then a multitude of colors as it filled in the center.

“I am so glad that worked,” Wei Ying said, and held his free hand out for Lan Zhan. They stepped through the portal, and through the doors of the temple at the peak of the mountain, hurrying to get out of the way for the next person through.

Even after Jin Zixuan, the last person in line had both feet on stone, the portal remained open.

Wen-popo waited at the top of the mountain, her arms wide open for her grandchildren to run into. A-Xi shrieked with delight and catapulted herself at Wen Popo.

A-Yuan stirred against Wei Ying’s shoulder. “Popo!” He cried out, and squirmed until Wei Ying put him down to run to her.

The children took Wen-popo’s hands and pulled her to the steps leading down to the residences. She protested that they should watch out for her old, weary back, though as a fierce corpse she could no longer feel pain.

Though Wen-popo had started hinting that she was ready to move on, she did not want the children to lose someone else so soon, and planned to stay until they were older. Farming and the company of her relatives was enough to keep her with them for now, but they all knew the day was coming where it would not be. A steep contrast between her and other fierce corpses Lan Wangji knew — the young woman with years left with her husband, the old carpenter who only seemed to grow more determined to achieve another masterpiece with each one he completed.

They would respect her choice when the time came.

As they walked down the steps, Lan Wangji noticed that the air passed more easily through his lungs than on previous visits. His core was so much stronger, he scarcely felt the altitude, though Jin Zixuan and Mianmian stopped to catch their breath multiple times, and both their children had to be picked up before they were halfway down. A-Yuan rested on Wen-popo’s back, as he had when he was younger, while A-Xi whined, out of breath, until Lan Wangji gave her a piggy back ride.

The dining hall had been ringed with tables for the occasion, a more formal setting than the mountain usually went for. Flowers had been set up everywhere in shades of pink, gathered from the ground near the villages below and scattered across the gardens to create a carpet of pink petals.

Neither woman of the hour were present yet, but laughter rang out from within the house from more than two voices, some of the disciples helping them get ready. “Do you mind if I...?” Wei Ying gestured toward the closed door.

Lan Wangji inclined his head, and Wei Ying settled A-Yuan back on the ground with Wen-popo, pecked Lan Wangji on the lips, and ran off, calling “*Waipooooo, A-Maaaa,*” in a

singsong voice.

Wen Qing went over to talk to one of the uncles from Dafan who still lived on the Mountain, bringing Mianmian with her, and Jin Zixuan trailed after. After today, Wen Qing would be able to visit her family, and they her, on a whim. But since the Yin Iron's destruction, the Mountain had decided she no longer had need of it, and could only visit the family that remained behind when Wei Ying or Lan Wangji opened the way for her. It had been some weeks since Wen Qing's last visit, and all of her relatives were eager to meet Mianmian again as her betrothed.

Lan Wangji suspected none of their friends would surface from the gaggle of Wens until the celebration was over.

While A-Yuan told Wen-popo all about his new puppet, Lan Wangji claimed seats next to Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen, and A-Qing and A-Xi promptly joined together to start causing chaos.

Xiao Xingchen and Song Zichen had spent the last half a year on the mountain, Xiao Xingchen adjusting to depth perception with one eye, and Song Zichen to his general undead state and increased strength. In the time before the children came to live with them, and officially became Wei Xi and Wei Yuan, the girls had grown close, and could often be found crafting mysterious potions and curses — thankfully, not ones that worked — out of mud.

They set to sparring within the circle of tables, A-Xi with a wooden sword Wei Ying had told her she was *not* to bring, against A-Qing's favored weapon, the quarterstaff. Lan Wangji kept a close eye on them, in case they trampled too close to newly sprouted vegetables, or toward the fragile porcelain dishes. He was prepared to intercede if necessary, but he and Wei Ying could talk to A-Xi about going behind their backs later at home, to avoid the chance of a tantrum at such an important celebration.

Baoshan Sanren had insisted multiple times it was a great relief those two troublemakers were no longer together on her mountain, which prompted Wei Ying to whine that *surely* he had been twice as much trouble as the both of them put together. Then Lan Yi bopped her finger against his nose, making it wrinkle, and told Wei Ying that he was training A-Xi to be trouble, so of course she was upholding his legacy. It was a wonder A-Yuan was so well behaved — it must be due to Lan Wangji's influence.

Of course, A-Yuan was only well behaved for his great-grandmothers, and Lan Wangji had yet to tell them that he was the more indulgent parent, to Wei Ying's great annoyance.

"Do you think we'll be in-laws someday?" Xiao Xingchen pointed toward the girls, where A-Qing was giggling and shrieking as A-Xi poked her in the stomach with her sword.

"Perhaps," Lan Wangji said, and left it at that. It would not be a terrible thing, but both girls were so very young. They had so much time ahead of them to grow and learn in a peaceful world. He wanted his children to have the chance to make their own choices, as no one of his generation had been granted the chance to.

A-Yuan trudged over from Wen-popo, and settled in Lan Wangji's lap. "When's dinner?" A-Yuan asked. "I'm hungry."

"Soon," Lan Wangji promised. The house had grown quieter, and he hoped they would be ready before A-Yuan got grumpy.

Just as he had hoped, it was not long before the door to the house swung open, and Baoshan Sanren emerged, hand in hand with Lan Yi. A-Xi immediately put her sword behind her back as she scooted her way sideways back to take her seat. A-Qing skipped back, twirling her quarterstaff until Song Zichen got up to stop her from swinging it into their dinner.

Both immortals were radiant with a happiness they had fought long and hard not to lose.

Lan Yi stood tall with the aid of a cane, carved by several of the mountain's disciples for their beloved shifu's wife when it became clear she would always walk with a limp. It was patterned with flower-laden branches, the head of a sparrow at its grip. Her hair, too, would always be pure white, but the sparkle had returned to her eyes, and the color to her skin.

She looked, for the first time since Lan Wangji had known her, as much an immortal as her wife. Yet she wore a pink dress for the occasion, gauzy and light, the skirt waving in the breeze like that of a girl in the first blush of youth.

Baoshan Sanren, in the robes of a cultivator patterned with sparrows, stared back at her smiling wife, still in awestruck disbelief that Lan Yi was alive and safe and healthy, and she got to keep her. That they got to have forever, or however many more years they might want. It was their choice, together, with no more obstacles in the form of a hunk of contaminated metal.

Today, they scarcely had attention for anything more than each other.

Lan Wangji understood the sentiment. He thought he would never stop marveling at the fact that Wei Ying was his, no matter how often Wei Ying told or showed how he loved him.

Wei Ying slid into the seat beside him. "Did our little radishes behave?"

"No," Lan Wangji said without elaboration and found himself entirely distracted by his husband's smile, until A-Yuan tugged on his sleeve, saying, "A-Die, we can eat now!"

"We sure can, Yuanyuan," Wei Ying reached for a noodle dish and started piling some into a bowl for A-Yuan.

The dishes laid out for the anniversary celebration were a mix of the couple's favorites, spicy mala noodles and chicken and tofu with ground beef for Baoshan Sanren, and braised tofu and vegetables of all kinds for Lan Yi, all of it cooked to perfection. Conveniently also perfect for Lan Wangji's husband and children, and for Lan Wangji himself as well.

"We were hoping we might use Yiling as a base for now." Xiao Xingchen said while they were eating. "A-Qing could have a more stable life, while we can wander when we get the urge."

“But I want to travel with you!” A-Qing scrunched up her face and balled her fists, preparing up to throw a fit suitable for a child three years younger.

At least until A-Xi gasped and grabbed her arm. “But A-Qing! Think about it. We could play together *everyday*. Don’t you miss it?”

“We don’t want what happened to you as a child to happen to A-Qing.” Xiao Xingchen said to Wei Ying, watching their daughters with a sad smile. “If anything else happens to us...”

“It better not,” Wei Ying warned, shaking his finger with a genuine frown. “But she will have a home should she need one, and a place to stay no matter what. Besides, A-Xi would love to see her more often. Oh, Waipo is going to make so much fun of me when she hears.”

“When Waipo hears what?” Baoshan Sanren chose that moment to drag her attention away from her wife.

“Hmmm...” Lan Yi tapped the ends of her chopsticks against her mouth. “Is it just me or does that expression say, ‘I regret everything I put my poor Waipo and A-Ma through as a child’?”

“I don’t *regret* it,” Wei Ying said. “I just, well. Understand your point of view better now.”

A-Yuan played with his noodles, eating them slowly and dropping shorter pieces back in the bowl, oblivious to the conversation, while A-Xi and A-Qing raided the dessert platter early.

Lan Yi’s laughter rang out like a bell, long and uninterrupted by coughing or fainting spells, and Baoshan Sanren again stared at her in wonder. They were absorbed in each other again just as quickly as they had emerged from their own little world.

Married five hundred years, and more in love than ever.

“We’ll have our own five hundredth anniversary someday,” Wei Ying whispered in his ear, mirroring his own thoughts. “Wait and see.”

“Can our celebration be smaller?” Lan Wangji asked.

“I think that’s up to the people of Yiling,” Wei Ying said. “Do you think they’ll have forgotten about us by then?”

Lan Wangji gave a quiet snort in lieu of a response, and Wei Ying laughed, throwing his head back, showing off the line of his unblemished neck, the perfect canvas for Lan Wangji to attempt to mark as many times as he wanted.

“You’re right, stupid question.” Wei Ying propped his head up on his hand, elbow on the table, watching Lan Wangji with half-lidded eyes. If Lan Wangji had not had their son in his lap, he would have leaned down to kiss him.

As if hearing his thoughts, Lan Yi leaned to kiss Baoshan Sanren over the vegetables. When she drew away, Lan Yi grabbed a pea from the serving bowl in front of her and poked it through Baoshan Sanren’s lips into her mouth.



Flirty and ridiculous, the picture of love everlasting.

A-Xi, seated by Lan Wangji on the side away from Wei Ying, suddenly reached over to A-Yuan and grabbed one of the ribbons from his hair. She jumped to her feet and started running around the tables, with some of Baoshan Sanren's disciples cheering her on. A-Yuan shrieked and scrambled out of Lan Wangji's lap to give chase.

"Don't hurt yourselves!" Wei Ying called after them. "You know what? It's fine. It's fine. Wen Qing will handle any scraped knees."

Lan Wangji smiled, watching the children race around them all, but it was only a matter of moments before Wei Ying inevitably drew his attention back to him, where it always belonged.

"Hey, Lan Zhan?"

"Yes, Wei Ying?"

"Have I told you how I adore you today?"

They both knew he had, but Lan Wangji shook his head.

Wei Ying dropped a brief, playful kiss on his lips. Lan Wangji caught him before he could move too far and pulled him back in, reigning himself in before their audience of both elders and children.

Five hundred years of love. Lan Wangji looked forward to that, and more.


There was a shriek as A-Xi sprinted back toward them with A-Yuan chasing after right through the vegetable garden, diving to the ground to wiggle beneath the table and popping out between Lan Wangji and Wei Ying. They scooted apart, slightly to make room for her.

"How did Yuanyuan get so fast? It's not fair! He's a baby!"

A-Yuan crashed into the table, but Wei Ying reacted quickly. No sooner had A-Yuan's shins collided with the wood than Wei Ying was lifting him over the table by the armpits, settling him in his lap.

A-Xi and A-Yuan blew raspberries at each other.

Lan Wangji had his family, most of it together, all of it flourishing, and what a miracle that was. He had his husband, and the future lay out before them, glittering with endless possibility.

Thank you for sticking with me all the way through my longest fic yet! I hope you enjoyed the ride 

If you'd like to see what I have planned next or say hi, I'm also isabilightwood on [Twitter](#) and [Tumblr](#). I have several new projects in the works!

And if you'd like, this is a new [Promo Tweet](#) for the complete fic!

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